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Final Report

Perceptions of Florida Strawberries –
Focus Groups

Florida Strawberry Research and Education
Foundation

Dr. Quisto Settle & Dr. Joy Rumble



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About the Authors

Quisto Settle, Ph.D. – Post-doctoral associate, UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education

Joy Rumble, Ph.D. – Assistant professor, UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education and Department of Agricultural Education and Communication

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Angie B. Lindsey, Ph.D. – Post-doctoral associate, UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education

Erica Odera – Research analyst, UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education

Taylor Ruth – Graduate assistant, UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education and Department of Agricultural Education and Communication

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Executive Summary

Florida Strawberry Growers Association/ Consumer Perceptions of Florida Strawberries
May 2014

Introduction

The PIE Center conducted research funded by the Florida Strawberry Research & Education Foundation to identify consumer-purchasing behaviors of strawberries, as well as identifying perceived barriers and benefits to purchasing Florida-grown strawberries. This component of the project consisted of focus groups conducted in November 2013. The results informed the development of an online survey that will be the subject of a different report. The project as a whole seeks to build on the momentum of local food trends in the United States.

Findings

The key finding from the focus groups indicated the participants used different criteria when deciding to purchase strawberries. The following four criteria were necessities:

- Nutrition – This was an attribute that could be taken for granted, to a certain extent, but it was an underlying motivation for purchasing strawberries, particularly as a healthier alternative to other snacks, such as potato chips.
- Good product – This attribute was necessary because participants would not purchase strawberries if they did not appear to be fresh. This preference for a good product also affected the time of year participants would purchase strawberries based on the belief of when strawberries were at their freshest in stores. This relates to the in-season attribute in the next group of criteria.
- Convenience – This attribute manifested itself in terms of participants wanting to purchase Florida strawberries where they already were buying their other groceries. Most participants were unlikely to go out of their way for Florida strawberries, even if they were less expensive.
- Price – Price affected participants' decisions to purchase strawberries, though each individual's threshold varied. Many bought strawberries when they were on sale or at times of year when they believed strawberries were less expensive. Price and convenience interacted because many participants believed the cost of driving to other stores would negate any savings even if another location had less expensive strawberries.

The following two were not necessities but were generally preferred and are particularly applicable when communicating about Florida strawberries:

- Local – All things being equal, participants would purchase Florida strawberries over other strawberries. This was due to participants' perceptions that Florida strawberries would be fresher due to the shorter distance travelled from field to store. Some participants were even willing to pay a little bit extra for Florida strawberries. That said, it was necessary for participants to know they were purchasing Florida strawberries, which was often not the case. The opportunity exists for the Florida strawberry industry to communicate to the public when Florida strawberries are available, as well as making it clear on product labels that the strawberries were grown in Florida.
- In season – Similar to preferences for local strawberries, participants believed that strawberries purchased in season would be fresher. Many participants only purchased strawberries when they believed strawberries were in season, though they did not all know when Florida strawberries were available. As with the previous attribute, the opportunity exists for the Florida strawberry industry to communicate when Florida strawberries are available to prime the public to look for Florida strawberries in stores.

Recommendations

There are four recommendations for the Florida strawberry industry to improve its collective brand:

1. **Good product** – The participants liked strawberries, which indicates the public believes a good product is being produced. This is the first step and serves as the base for building an effective brand. The qualities of the product serve as points that can be made when marketing the product. Florida strawberries, in particular, had positive associations of being fresh and nutritious. The industry can capitalize on these associations by making it clear in their communications and on product labeling that the strawberries are from Florida.
2. **Convenient** – This is the next step and refers to availability in stores, prices the public considers affordable, and having means to use strawberries. The industry can communicate availability by advertising when Florida strawberries are available and making it clear on product labeling the strawberries are from Florida. For price, the industry needs to communicate the value of the product (e.g., nutritious, supports local economy) to justify the price. As for use, while many eat strawberries fresh and whole, others made purchases based on specific recipes and dishes. Improving knowledge of the variety of uses for Florida strawberries could be an avenue to increase purchase of Florida strawberries.
3. **Promote as local product** – Participants generally preferred local products, including positive associations of freshness and supporting the local economy. Communications should make it clear that strawberries are from Florida to leverage those positive associations. Use of the Fresh from Florida logo is an option available to the industry.
4. **Build an effective brand** – This is a culmination of the previous recommendations and is necessary for long-term success for Florida strawberries. Ideally, this reaches a point where buying Florida strawberries is a cultural component similar to people who buy orange juice without even thinking about it. This is the long-term goal and involves consistently letting the public know when Florida strawberries are available and being consistent use of brand identifiers, such as the Fresh from Florida logo. It also depends on consistently providing a good product to the public.

Background

According to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), 9,900 acres of strawberries were harvested during the 2010-2011 growing season. This number is up from 6,600 acres reported during the 2006-2007 growing season. The total value of Florida strawberries harvested in 2010-2011 was \$366,300,000. Florida is known as the winter strawberry capital of the world, and ranks second in United States production of strawberries behind California. However, in the height of Florida's 2013 strawberry season, The Tampa Tribune reported that retail giant Walmart was carrying strawberries from Mexico in its Plant City store.

Florida strawberry producers as well as other Florida fruit and vegetable producers are beginning to feel the pressure of increasingly competitive global food markets. The increasing competitive global market has prompted FDACS to ramp up promotions of its Fresh From Florida brand. The Citrus Industry Magazine reports that these increased promotions will be aimed at enhancing the strength and sales of Florida-grown products. Although increased promotions of the Fresh From Florida brand may provide benefits to the Florida strawberry industry, a need continues to exist to increase salience and differentiation of Florida-grown strawberries.

Rabobank AgFocus recently reported that local food has become a trend among United States consumers that is expected to continue to increase throughout the next five years. Additionally, a national study of United States consumers, conducted in the fall of 2012 by a Chicago consulting firm, found that consumers were willing to pay more for locally grown foods. Inconvenience has been identified as one of the largest barriers preventing the purchase of local food by a recent study conducted by University of Florida researchers. The same study also found that food grown anywhere in the state was accepted as local by Florida consumers. Local food studies like these provide a foundation to explore consumer preference for commodity specific products, such as strawberries.

This study seeks to build on previous work by identifying consumer-purchasing behaviors of strawberries and identifying perceived barriers and benefits to purchasing Florida-grown strawberries. The results will be used to develop and test marketing strategies to enhance the identified benefits and remove the barriers to purchasing Florida-grown strawberries.

Methods

Six focus groups were conducted in Jacksonville, FL, in October 2013. The vast majority of participants were individuals who purchased strawberries and one participant who liked strawberries but did not purchase strawberries. The purpose of the focus groups was to gather information about consumers' current strawberry-purchasing behaviors, as well as identifying benefits and barriers for purchasing Florida strawberries. The moderator's guide addressed how participants select strawberries, where they buy strawberries from, their consideration of seasonality of strawberries, their consideration of where strawberries are grown, their preferences for packaging labels, their perceptions of billboards promoting Florida strawberries, what would prevent them from buying Florida strawberries, and what would incentivize them purchasing Florida strawberries.

Individuals familiar with focus group methodology as well as individuals within the Florida Strawberry Growers Association reviewed the moderator's guide to ensure that the needs of the strawberry industry were addressed. The same, trained moderator led all six focus groups, with an assistant moderator and a note taker also present for the focus groups. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy of information gathered from participants. The transcripts were analyzed for themes in participants' responses.

Results

Demographics

Table 1 shows the demographics of the participants. There were 50 participants total. The majority of participants were female (60%). The most-represented income groups among participants were those whose family income was \$30,001 to \$45,000 (36%) and \$45,001 to \$60,000 (20%). The majority of participants' highest level of education was some college without degree completion (52%). The majority of participants indicated their race was White (66%). Table 2 shows the list of participants by focus group, including their pseudonym used for the report, sex, and occupation.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants.

	<i>f</i>	%	<i>M</i>
Sex			
Male	20	40	-
Female	30	60	-
Age	-	-	53.3
Income*			
\$30,000 or less	9	18	-
\$30,001-\$45,000	18	36	-
\$45,001-\$60,000	10	20	-
\$60,001-\$80,000	7	14	-
\$80,001-\$100,000	1	2	-
\$100,001-\$125,000	3	6	-
Education			
Less than HS or GED	2	4	-
HS or GED	4	8	-
Some college	26	52	-
College graduate	7	14	-
Graduate degree	9	18	-
Professional degree	2	4	-
Race*			
White	33	66	-
Black or African-American	16	32	-
Hispanic	3	6	-

**Note.* Indicates there was one person in the category who declined to answer the question.

Table 2. Focus group participants listed by pseudonym, sex, and occupation.

Group	Pseudonym	Sex	Occupation
1	Rachel	Female	Retired
1	Emma	Female	Financial analyst
1	Tina	Female	Stay-at-home mom
1	Kurt	Male	Welder
1	Will	Male	Career counselor
1	Brittany	Female	Retired
1	Blaine	Male	Did not say
1	Noah	Male	Retired
2	Jody	Female	Programmer
2	Stacy	Female	Bank worker
2	Kevin	Male	Auto mechanic
2	Mack	Male	Project manager
2	Trent	Male	Former Navy
2	Charles	Male	Teacher
2	Sandy	Female	Counselor
2	Jane	Female	Student
2	Quinn	Female	Airport warehouse
2	Daria	Female	Motor coach operator
3	Angie	Female	Retired
3	Laurie	Female	Technical support
3	Rhonda	Female	Technical support
3	Jackie	Female	On disability
3	Donna	Female	Health care
3	Eric	Male	Retired
4	John	Male	Beverage company
4	Carla	Female	Paralegal
4	Chris	Male	Not specified
4	Jordan	Female	Retired
4	Kim	Female	Retired
4	Denise	Female	Retired
4	Perry	Male	Retired
4	Molly	Female	Payroll for hospital
5	Tom	Male	Finance
5	Caryn	Female	Student
5	August	Female	Retired
5	Nina	Female	Blue Cross
5	Mary	Female	Stay-at-home mom
5	Richard	Male	Retired
5	Sally	Female	Retired
5	Harry	Male	Student
5	Don	Male	Disabled veteran
6	Allison	Female	Works from home (not specified)
6	Jack	Male	Attorney
6	Zoe	Female	Chemical business owner
6	Beverly	Female	Unemployed
6	Sarah	Female	Stay-at-home mom
6	Nathan	Male	Merchant seaman
6	Henry	Male	Call center employee
6	Josephina	Female	Attorney
6	Douglas	Male	Retired

Introduction

The results of this focus group are separated by the different sections of questions that were asked of participants. Within each section, responses are grouped by themes. The quotes within each theme are a sample of the responses from participants.

Buying Fruits & Vegetables

For this section, participants were asked about their general behaviors when buying fruits and vegetables, including where they buy fresh produce, how they select fruits and vegetables, and if they consider food production location and seasonality when purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables.

Where they buy

The location mentioned the most frequently by participants was Publix.

- Emma: “I shop at Publix. I like shopping there because they sell local . . . They get local vegetables, locally grown vegetables.”
- Zoe: “I shop a Publix. I like to be spoiled, so that’s the right place for me.”

Other locations that recurred included farmers markets, Walmart, and Winn Dixie.

- Noah: “I go to the farmers market a lot for produce. And then what I can’t find there, I’ll go to Publix because it’s convenient.”
- Beverly: “I shop at Walmart about three or four times a week. It’s five minutes from my house. And I go to Rowe’s, I go to Winn Dixie.”

How they select fruits and vegetables

Participants’ responses were primarily sensory in nature, specifically to determine the freshness of the produce. Sight was the primary sense used.

- Kevin: “For me, it’s primarily appearance. When you pick up whatever you’re looking at, and there’s all kinds of spots where it’s starting to get overripe or under-ripe, and that’s kind of a turn off. You want it to be just in that right range.” Color was a component of appearance.
- Molly: “I go by the way it looks. If it’s pretty. If it’s orange, it’s pretty orange. If it’s a strawberry, you want it to be red, no brown.”

Other senses used included touch, smell, and taste.

- Touch
 - Trent: “For me, it’s touch. If it’s too smushy, or for example, tomatoes, it has to be [firm].”
- Smell
 - Rhonda: “I smell the butt of [the fruits], the back . . . one end or the other.”
- Taste
 - Josephina: “The taste is a factor to me. Sometimes when they have samples in the grocery stores, and I taste something delicious, even if it’s not what I went to the store to get, I’ll get it.”

Seasonality

Participants' perceptions of food being in season impacted their beliefs of freshness/taste and price. This was due to the belief that less time would be needed for food to go from the field to stores. For freshness/taste, there was the perception that food should be fresher because of the absence of transport time.

- Zoe: "I'll pay any price for something that's good if I really want it. . . . But I have bought grapes out of season. I remember doing that years ago; they were the worst-tasting things."

For price, there was the expectation that in-season produce would be less expensive because the cost of transportation was less of a factor.

- Charles: "I also shop at the Commissary, and a lot of times . . . they'll say it's locally grown, and they'll actually have a picture of the farmer and what farm it came from. . . . And it tends to be a little cheaper when it's that way."

For many of the participants, seasonality did not impact their decisions.

- Denise: "There are many fruits that maybe do grow here but they grow in other countries, and maybe their season is different than ours. So, if it's there and it's good and you know what it tastes like, you buy it."

Food production location

There was a general expectation that produce grown in Florida would be fresher than its counterparts from other domestic and international locations.

- Tina: "I think [produce tastes] better . . . if it's ripened on the vine, rather than I mean, you know, that's why local is better tasting because it's ripened on the vine when you eat it rather than traveling and pulling it earlier and it ripens as it travels."

Some participants stated they did not know the production location of the food they purchased.

- Mack: "When I walk up and pick broccoli, it's sitting with all other broccoli heads, and I don't see a sign that says where it's from."

Other participants did not care about the production location of their produce.

- Rhonda: "I don't feel any way about [buying international produce]. Not bad or positive," to which Jackie replied, "Half the time you don't know anyway."

Overall, though, there was a general preference for Florida produce.

- Emma: "If there's a California orange here and a Florida orange here, get the Florida orange."
- Jane: "I like to buy local as close as we can get."

In regards to international produce, some of the participants exhibited a lack of trust for such produce.

- Brittany: "Well, the problem with foreign fruit and vegetables, you don't know what type of conditions they're grown in. You don't know if they're . . . how they're fertilized and that . . . that's big."

Strawberries

Participants were then asked to more specifically talk about their strawberry purchasing behaviors. This included how often participants purchased strawberries, how participants select strawberries, why participants purchase strawberries, what consideration they give production location when purchasing strawberries, and how participants use/prepare strawberries.

Frequency

Frequency of strawberry purchase varied among participants, with no clear trends among all participants, though the following responses were fairly typical among participants:

- August: “During the Florida growing season, in the winter, January, February, and March, I probably buy them two or three times a week because they’re always on sale. But during the rest of the year it might be once a month if they’re on sale.”
- Mary: “I’d say once a month but more in the summer. When the kids are home from school, they tend to snack on them more.”
- Jody: “In the summertime and when they’re in season, every week, sometimes twice a week because they don’t stay fresh through the week.”

Participants’ responses often varied based on their perceptions of when strawberries were in season, though some were incorrect on their assumptions of Florida strawberry season.

How they select strawberries

Responses for this line of questioning were fairly similar to how respondents select fruits and vegetables in general. The primary characteristic being assessed was the freshness of the strawberries, including avoiding rotten or bruised strawberries.

- Sarah: “Usually since I buy it weekly, I pick up the carton and make sure there’s no dead ones on the bottom.”
- Jane: “Freshness,” to which Kevin replied, “And you want to make sure there’s none of the little white fuzz growing in there yet.”

Color was a more specific attribute participants were looking at in selecting strawberries.

- Blaine: “I usually just look at them for that deep dark red color and usually that tells me that they’re pretty good, and if you got a little green on the end that wouldn’t matter as well because I’m still going to enjoy.”

Participants also paid attention to other attributes, though not to the extent of freshness and color.

- Location
 - Emma: “I’ve looked at strawberries whenever they’ve come from California during their season or whatever, and I just don’t get that sweetness.”
- Size
 - Noah: “I try to get the smallest ones that I can find, too, because I think when they get real big then they . . . lose flavor.”
 - Daria: “I like them big.”
- Texture/firmness

- Eric: I open it up and push them around and see if they are mushy, and if they are, I take a different one,” to which Rhonda replied, “I thought I was the only person who does that.”
- Smell
 - Emma: “And I smell them, too.”
- Season
 - Emma: “I look for whether they’re in season.”
- Taste
 - Charles: “I check the texture and sometimes I’ll just eat one.”

Why they buy strawberries

Responses for this line of questioning went in two directions. The first was the broad question of why participants buy strawberries, and the second was participants addressing why they would purchase Florida strawberries, specifically.

Buying Strawberries in General

For why strawberries were purchased in general, there were three reasons that recurred: nutrition, for their kids, and price. For some, the nutritional benefits of strawberries are so ingrained in their perceptions that they were not actively considering nutrition.

- Jody: “[Strawberries] are very nutritious. . . . [But] I don’t consider nutrition.”
- Kevin: “[Nutrition]’s somewhere vaguely in the back of my mind. Like I said, I snack on them instead of potato chips or something while I’m sitting on the couch but beyond that, no.”

Purchasing for kids related to nutrition. Many of the participants were purchasing strawberries as a healthy snack alternative for their kids.

- Nina: “We purchase a lot of strawberries because we have a six year old. We try to keep her out of candy and stuff, so I would say it averages out to be about once a month.”

The third reason for purchasing strawberries in general was price.

- Quinn: “[I buy strawberries] only once a month when I can get one free.”
- Brittany: “Buy one, get one free.”

Some participants, though, ignored price when they really wanted strawberries.

- Trent: “I realize strawberries ain’t cheap, but we love them, so we make the sacrifice and purchase it. It’s pretty expensive.”

Buying Florida Strawberries

For purchasing Florida strawberries, two broad themes emerged. The first was related to shipping. Specifically, participants expected Florida strawberries to be less expensive and fresher because of the shorter distance the strawberries are being shipped.

- Less expensive
 - Noah: “When they’re in season, we know the seasons and then when the price is dropping, we know that we’re getting the local [strawberries].”
- Fresher

- Kurt: “You have to ship them earlier [if they’re from farther away] so they won’t spoil. . . . And sometimes they get mushy on the way and stuff like that.”

The second was related to the economy. Specifically, participants wanted to support the state economy and local farmers.

- Charles: “Helps the local farmers, helps the local economy.”

Production location

Many participants expressed a preference for Florida strawberries, though this often did not mention specific attributes, just an overall feeling.

- Jane: “I feel good about purchasing strawberries that were grown in Florida.”

In some cases, the participants mentioned positive experiences with Florida strawberries.

- Trent: “We go to the flea market sometimes to get our strawberries and whenever I question the lady, she say [*sic*], ‘Oh, we got these strawberries from Tampa, grown there.’ So we love them.”

While many participants cared about where their strawberries were grown, others did not care and/or did not pay attention.

- Chris: “It doesn’t bother me. I am kind of an organic buyer. I want to . . . It’s not like I buy organic food, but I smell it, touch it . . . if I can, taste it. I’m one of those people, I might eat a strawberry on the sly in the supermarket.”
- Nathan: “Usually if you buy them out of the store, they don’t really tell you actually where they actually really come from, but I don’t think that makes a big deal.”

How they use/prepare strawberries

Participants were asked how they use/prepare strawberries. Responses were coded into six themes:

- Fresh
 - Molly: “I wash them and cut off the green part and just keep them in the refrigerator and then we just, whenever you open the door, you can grab one.”
 - Tina: “I sometime think I’m going to make a recipe and then never make it that far because they’re gone.”
- Supplement/added to another dish
 - Sarah: “My husband cuts them up every morning and puts them in his cereal.”
 - Kurt: “I eat them in cereal, but I like them in ice cream.”
- Ingredient for a dish
 - Nina: “We want strawberry shortcake, too, so every now and then we’ll mash them up and make strawberry shortcake.”
 - Daria: “I make strawberry bread.”
- Drinks
 - Denise: “They’re good in smoothies. . . . Get some good almond milk and little bit of honey and some strawberries. That’s good stuff.”
 - Beverly: “Milkshakes. We do strawberry milkshakes for the children, too.”
- Sugar/chocolate added
 - Rhonda: “I like to just take them and eat them whole with a little sugar.”

- Jody: “Chocolate dip. You would not believe how easy chocolate fondue is to make. If you ever knew, everybody would serve chocolate fondue, chocolate dipped strawberries.”
- Preserve (freeze, jam)
 - Charles: “I purchase it in season, but I don’t purchase it every week because like I say, I’ll buy a flat and it will last me some time, and then just before they go out of season, I’ll buy another one and then kind of freeze it that way.”
 - Beverly: “We have made jam out of them a couple of times.”

Packaging Preferences

For this portion of the focus groups, participants were presented with six different label variations (Appendix A). The differences included use of the Fresh From Florida logo, different country of origin labels, and inclusion of the city strawberries originate from.

Fresh From Florida logo

The participants expressed positive perceptions of the Fresh from Florida logo. Most responses were not very specific beyond the participants liking to see the logo and it drawing attention.

- Don: “It helps because that’s like a seal of approval that the strawberries are fresh. It’s like, you know, giving your word.”
- Sandy: “It catches your eye.”

Another positive aspect was related to the specificity of indicating the product was from Florida, not just a product of the USA.

- Beverly: “And although people say it doesn’t make a difference where they come from, most of the people in this room are picking the one Fresh from Florida. I mean the other ones are clearly . . . USA, Mexico. USA, well, that could be anywhere in the USA, you know . . . but the Fresh from Florida normally means that they are fresh because you get them a lot quicker than if they have to ship them from somewhere else to this state.”
- Jane: “That’s what jumps out at you because everything else is just the green label, but those ones, you immediately know that it’s from Florida.”

While this was not a trend, a participant in one group expressed skepticism that Fresh from Florida meant the food was actually grown in Florida.

- Brittany: “Does it necessarily mean it’s from Florida, though? I mean, that it’s grown in Florida or does it mean it’s just being sold in Florida? . . . Yeah, if it was changed, you know, like Grown in Florida, that’s perfect because that’s got where it’s grown, where they got it from, you know, it’s a product of the USA.”

Location

The participants liked being able to see where the strawberries came from, particularly for ones that came from Plant City, FL.

- Eric: “That really brings it home, personalizes it. It is not just Florida . . . Plant City, Florida. And I don’t know where Plant City is, but by naming the place, it makes me think ‘Ooh, that would be really supporting [local businesses].’”

- Harry: “I think the name of the city and the state is a good idea. Because that way you can specifically tell which city it came from. Because right there on the right hand corner, it doesn’t say which city it’s from. It just says ‘Fresh from Florida.’ Well that could be just a stamp.”

Florida Strawberries

In this section, participants were specifically asked about their purchasing behaviors, knowledge, and perceptions of Florida strawberries. Knowledge included if they knew where their strawberries came from and if they knew when Florida strawberries were in season. Perceptions included benefits of buying Florida strawberries and barriers to buying Florida strawberries.

Where they are bought

Participants’ responses for where they bought Florida strawberries from were similar to their responses for where they brought fruits and vegetables. The most typical response was grocery stores.

- Quinn: “Just a regular old grocery store.”
- Laurie: “I go to Publix. Sometimes Walmart.”

Other common responses were farmers markets and roadside stands.

- Nina: “I mostly buy from the grocery store, but I do like to go to the farmers market every now and then.”
- Tom: “If I see a roadside stand that looks promising, I’ll stop and buy them.”

Knowledge of strawberry sources

Participants were asked how they knew where strawberries they purchased came from. Many participants did not know where their strawberries came from.

- Angie: “I had a box yesterday in my refrigerator, and I took it and turned it over, and I couldn’t find any place where it was from. All it said was something like ‘well picked’ or something like that.”

While some participants did not know where their strawberries were from and were unable to find it on the packaging, other participants mentioned stickers and labels as their sources for figuring out where their strawberries were from.

- Beverly: “Normally, it’s on the package and because when you buy them in the . . . normally when you buy them in the store they’re in a container like the ones on the [screen].”

Other participants relied on the sellers (e.g., stores or farmers) to be able to tell them or to post signs.

- Josephina: “And when you buy them at a farmers market, you’re usually talking to the person who . . . whose farm they were grown at.”
- Emma: “I’m trusting that the store has it marked right.”

Seasonality

There was mixed knowledge for knowing when Florida strawberries were in season.

- Some participants knew.
 - August: “January through March.”
- Many participants stated they did not know.

- Tom: “Just see it when the store advertises it.”
- There were also participants who incorrectly thought they knew when Florida strawberries were available.
 - Denise: “I would say in the spring and summertime.”

Benefits of buying Florida strawberries

When discussing the benefits of buying Florida strawberries, five themes that emerged:

- A general preference for Florida strawberries
 - Tom: “If I see something from Florida and particularly, if I see something that is somewhere close to Jacksonville, I am going to buy that.”
 - Carla: “Love ‘em. That is my first preference.”
- Taste/Freshness
 - Douglas: “Well, I think one thing, you know, it’s a lot fresher to buy them from Florida.”
 - Daria: “Well you don’t have that time between the time they leave the field and the time they get to your refrigerator or your kitchen, you know, they’re . . . they’re fresher.”
- Economy
 - John: “It is better for the economy of Florida, keeps it in the state.”
 - Beverly: “I would rather support our local grower before I would support the other people. I mean, just because . . . if it wasn’t for them we wouldn’t have that fresh of strawberries.”
- Price
 - Nina: “It’s probably cheaper as well because it’s grown locally.”
 - Noah: “When they’re in season, we know the seasons and then when the price is dropping we know that we’re getting the local, yeah, but . . . or we assume anyway.”
- Shipping
 - Emma: “I would prefer, you know, one day’s travel or less.”
 - Carla: “Another reason I buy Florida strawberries is that they have a longer shelf life than others because they haven’t traveled as far.”

Barriers to buying Florida strawberries

When asked to discuss any potential barriers to buying Florida strawberries, three themes emerged:

- Freshness/Taste
 - Eric: “If they turn out to be less tasty. You know, if they are not as sweet.”
 - Molly: “If they don’t look good. I mean, when you go to purchase them in the store.”
- Price
 - Donna: “If the prices were higher than other strawberries.”
 - Laurie: “The price would be the main thing for me, probably.”
- Food safety
 - Kurt: “If you get many cases of people getting sick from it, you know, and stuff like that. So if they put that flag up there, you know, that’s the only thing, you now, will keep people back from it, you know.”
 - Rhonda: “If it was having to be recalled, I wouldn’t purchase it.”

Billboard Preferences

Participants were shown six mockups of billboards intended to promote Florida strawberries (Appendix B). Participants were asked their general thoughts for each billboard individually, including what they liked and did not like about each

billboard. At the end of this process, all billboard mockups were shown at once. With all options showing, participants selected their favorites and discussed which characteristics among all the billboards the participants liked and disliked.

Billboard 1

This billboard drew mixed reactions.

- For instance, there were positive reactions to the line of strawberries and the mirrored reflection.
 - Tina: “It reminds me of people at the beach like there’s a lot of people at the beach, the water reflection I don’t know why it just kind of . . . they’re like all perfect and I don’t know.”
- There were also negative reactions to the line of strawberries and mirrored reflection.
 - Jordan: “I don’t like the straight line. I think they should be mixed up a little bit.”
- The equals sign elicited a negative reaction from a couple of participants.
 - Carla: “The equal sign bothers me because there is nothing on the other side to equal it.”

Billboard 2

This billboard was one of the most popular when participants selected their favorite.

- Some participants liked the hands holding the strawberries.
 - Charles: “I think that the hands, I think, play a role for me, and it implies the freshness, the cleanness that you just want to get a handful and just eat them raw.”
- There were also some who did not believe there were enough strawberries.
 - Douglas: “Well, like [the other participants] said, doesn’t show enough strawberries and you probably won’t pay much attention to the writing. I think the strawberries would be the thing to draw your attention.”
- The “All Winter Long!” elicited confusion from some participants, which relates to many not knowing when Florida strawberries were available.
 - Will: “Are strawberries grown in Florida all winter long?”
- “American Grown” also elicited confusion, particularly because they “Florida Strawberries” were already in the billboard.
 - Emma: “But I don’t know about the ‘American Grown.’ I wouldn’t . . . that would make me doubt really whether it’s Florida strawberries.”

Billboard 3

- The “Florida Fresh and Fabulous” tagline on this billboard elicited positive reactions from participants.
 - Noah: “It doesn’t say America’s; It’s Florida Fresh and Fabulous, and I think that’s great.”
- The design of this billboard was contrasted with the preceding two billboards, with many participants liking the overall design of the current billboard more.
 - Nathan: “I think it’s more . . . a little better than all the other ones because there’s more going on with it, like it’s more action to it.”

Discussion of the strawberries included in billboards 3-6 will be discussed in the perceptions of elements used section later in this report because these billboards all included the same image.

Billboard 4

This billboard did not elicit positive reactions from participants. The outlined strawberry in particular elicited negative reactions.

- Kevin: “It almost looks like an apple.”
- Daria responded to Kevin’s statement: “It does look like an apple.”

Billboard 5

This billboard also did not elicit positive reactions. Use of “Scrumptious” was noted by many.

- Josephina: “It just seems like a poor use of space, and ‘Scrumptious’ takes up too much room. I think the attention should be on ‘Florida Strawberries, In Season Now.’ Get rid of ‘Scrumptious,’ make ‘Florida Strawberries’ bigger and bolder.”

Billboard 6

This billboard, like 4 and 5, did not tend to elicit positive reactions. Many of the participants did not notice “In season now!” because of the font color.

- Donna: “I wouldn’t notice the ‘In season now!’ because the coloring. It’s the color, I think, that’s better.”

Favorite

After seeing all of the billboards, participants were shown a slide with all six and asked to pick their favorite. The billboard that read “Florida fresh and fabulous” was picked as the favorite by the most groups (Billboard #3). The billboard with the image of hands holding strawberries was second (Billboard #2), and the billboard with the line of strawberries was third (Billboard #1), though this billboard had the most mixed reactions of all 6 billboard options.

Perceptions of elements used

Inclusion of the Fresh from Florida logo drew positive reactions.

- Mary: “It’s like a ‘Made in America’ logo, you know, you eye’s drawn to it. You’re going to give it some credibility.”

The only negative that emerged was that some participants wanted it to be bigger.

- Kevin referred to Billboard #3: “I would say make the [Fresh from Florida] logo right there in the middle a little bit bigger.”

The inclusion of the website drew mixed reactions.

- Some participants reported they would use the website.
 - Don: “Yeah, I’d be curious to [see] what’s on the website; I’d look it up.”
- But others did not believe they would use the website, in large part because they did not believe it was feasible as they were driving on the highway.
 - Jody: “Yeah, I don’t see anybody really wanting to go. . . . You’re in a car driving through Florida, and you want to go log on?”
- Some participants were not sure if they would use it.
 - Tom: “I think it’s easy enough to remember, I mean, while you are driving you can hold that in . . . floridastrawberry.com. Would I use it? I don’t know if I would use it or not.”

The strawberry picture in billboards 3-6 drew mixed reactions from participants, mostly due to the strawberries being on the vine.

- Positive reactions generally related to the strawberries being perceived as fresher.
 - Carla: “The way the strawberries are sitting on the vine, right there, like they’re . . .” Molly interrupted, “Like they’re fresh, like they’re . . .like you’re getting them fresh, from the vine to your house.”
- But negative reactions also stemmed from the vine because the participants were not sure they were strawberries because participants were not used to seeing strawberries on the vine.
 - Kevin: “By the time [the strawberries] get to the store, they don’t have all of the greenery still attached. So from a distance, you wouldn’t be able to really tell if those are strawberries because you’re not used to seeing it with all that greenery attached.”
- And the strawberries were comparatively small as a focal point due to the leaves and vines
 - Rhonda: “Those strawberries are not appetizing to me. They look a little puny.”

The tagline “In Season Now” drew mixed reactions.

- There was confusion from some participants who were seeing “All winter long” and believed the “In Season Now” would be misleading if the billboards were up all year
 - Rhonda: “‘In Season Now,’ that is kind of contradicting what the other ones said. If it is grown all winter long . . . We don’t know when it is grown.”

Barriers & Benefits

In this section, barrier and benefits for purchasing Florida strawberries were discussed more in-depth. Among the topics were in-season availability of strawberries, willingness to purchase Florida strawberries at added costs or inconvenience compared to imported strawberries, the effect of purchasing Florida strawberries on local businesses and economies, and the use of reminders to promote purchase of Florida strawberries.

Availability of in-season strawberries in stores

The participants were asked what they would do if they knew Florida strawberries were in season but not being stocked in stores.

- The primary response was to go to different location, such as another store.
 - Charles: “I think they’re sold at most locations and normally, at least I don’t shop at . . .I’ll shop primarily for the bulk of my things at one store, but there’s always a could of things that you have that may be store-specific. And a lot of times those stores have strawberries and other fruits as well. So I’ll just look to see if they have that at another store.”
- The other alternative locations mentioned were farmers markets or roadside stands.
 - Kurt: “If it ain’t in the store, I’ll go wherever they at, you know, and stuff like that. If they ain’t at Winn-Dixie and stuff like that, so you go to another store. But they in season, you know, you might go to the farmers market, they might have them and stuff like that.”
- Talking to someone working at the grocery store was another response.
 - Jane: “If they’re in season, I’m going to ask the person in the produce department if they have any strawberries in the back or if they’re expecting a truck. And if there’s some glitch in the system that they’re not going to get any more for a while, I might go to you know, the farmers market and pick up some strawberries while they’re in season.”
- And either buying the strawberries that were available or buying something else.

- Laurie: “It really still wouldn’t matter if they had Florida grown or not. But if I get to that next place, and they have them, fine. But if they don’t have them and the ones that are there are a good price and they look good, I am going to get them.”

Participants were then asked if they would be willing to ask someone at the grocery store about stocking Florida Strawberries if they were in season but not available in the store. Responses were mixed.

- Many participants would be willing to ask.
 - Josephina: “I would. . . . And that would be limited to whoever’s in the produce section and me asking them. Because I’ve gone, I mean, I love clementine’s right now, and I am hounding them about certain types of citrus and when they’re going to have it in.”
- Some already had for other products.
 - Richard: “I’ve specifically asked for things [to] be carried at stores that I wanted to see. . . . First question they asked me was, ‘How much was I going to use?’ So it makes a difference. But they will carry the stuff you want them to. Publix is great for ordering things. . . . You pay the premium, but they’ll do the service.”
- Some participants were unwilling because they would rather go somewhere else.
 - Tom: “I think there’d be easier ways to get them. People mentioned the farmers market or roadside stand, why not just go there?”
- Others felt that asking as an individual is not significant enough to change a store’s stocking.
 - Harry: “If you’re one person asking the entire store, a huge chain, to start the strawberries just for you. . . .

Cost/convenience

Participants were given two scenarios and asked if they would purchase Florida strawberries under certain situations. The first situation was Florida strawberries being less expensive but an inconvenient location. Inconvenient was left up to participants to define for themselves. Responses were fairly mixed, though there was more of a tendency for participants to not be willing to go to an inconvenient location.

- This is an example quote from a larger portion of participants who would not go to an inconvenient location to buy strawberries:
 - Donna: “I go at five o’clock in the morning at a certain place, or six o’clock, and I am not going to go . . . like some people go to five stores. You know, I remember in the day, you went somewhere else, you went somewhere else. I will stick with . . . if it’s \$2.98 at Publix, and I see \$3.49 . . . almost say \$3.10 . . . I am going to stick with \$3.10 and keep going. Because that is gas I would save and also my time, because of my schedule.”
- This is an example quote from a smaller portion of participants who would go to an inconvenient location to buy strawberries:
 - Daria: “I would go and get the better flavor and the better product. It doesn’t matter to me if I’m . . . going to buy something I want it to be good just because it’s available and more . . . the availability is more, I would be willing to drive to get what I wanted.”
- This is an example quote from the other smaller portion of participants who might go to an inconvenient location to buy strawberries under certain circumstances:
 - Beverly: “Well, I guess it all depends on how bad you want them. You’ll go to that location and get them if you want them that bad, I would think.”

In the second scenario the Florida strawberries were more expensive but in the same, convenient location as the alternative. Responses were again mixed. The difference of price was a significant qualifier, with many participants willing to pay more within reasonable limit.

- Would buy more expensive Florida strawberries at a convenient location:
 - Kevin: “If they were clearly labeled that they were from Florida, I’d probably buy the Florida ones.”
- Would not buy more expensive Florida strawberries at a convenient location:
 - Nathan: “I mean, if they’re equal, and one’s a different price than the other, I’ll pick the cheapest.”
- Depends on price and quality:
 - Molly: “I just think it’s going to depend on the price factor. I’m willing to pay a little bit more, but I draw the line somewhere. What that line is, I don’t know.”
 - Jack: “I’m going to buy the ones that look the best to me, and if they’re equal and one’s cheaper, and I notice, I’ll pay the cheaper price. Probably won’t notice, and I’ll just pick something up.”

Local economy

Participants were asked the effect of knowing that Florida strawberries came from local farmers had on their decisions for whether or not they would purchase Florida strawberries. Buying strawberries from local producers was viewed as a way of helping the local economy. Responses were mixed in terms of the impact.

- For some participants, there was a positive impact.
 - Kevin: “It’s always good to support your local economy. I mean, I’d think most Americans know that we’re losing economically on the world trade stage, and if they can, they want to buy American wherever it’s economically feasible for them to do so.”
- For others, they would purchase the local strawberries but only if it was convenient and not more expensive.
 - Eric: “I like to think local and buy local. So if something says locally produce, I am much more likely to buy it. But only if it is convenient also. I am not going to go to another store to find it.”
 - Carla: “So basically, we’re saying if we’re looking at a Florida strawberry and Mexico strawberry, the Florida strawberry should be cheaper, period.”
- Still, many others simply did not know if they were purchasing Florida strawberries in the first place.
 - Henry: “You’d like to know that you are helping, you now, the local guy, but that’s not always evident, right?”

Reminders

Participants were asked what would help them remember to purchase Florida strawberries.

- The largest number of responses focused advertisements and signage in stores.
 - Eric: “Put a sign in the store. And certainly Winn-Dixie and Publix, these are both Florida companies, they should be quite willing to participate in the campaign even maybe more broadly than just strawberries, for our farmers.”
- The other responses that showed up multiple times were for providing samples and demonstrations in stores, as well as use of the Fresh from Florida logo.
 - Charles: “Sometimes demos or samples, people out there letting you know that hey, they’re in season, they’re here, you know, they’re fresh, and it makes a difference. I mean we all have bought stuff that we didn’t think about buying because someone said, ‘Oh, try this.’”

- Mary: “If [the logo’s] there as a visual reminder when you’re looking at two packages, if you see that little [Fresh from Florida] logo.”

Strawberry Festival

Participants were asked if they had attended the Florida Strawberry Festival in Plant City. Only nine of the participants had been to the strawberry festival.

- Those who had been to the festival enjoyed the experience.
 - Josephina upon hearing no one else in her focus group had been to the festival: “You guys are missing out.”
- Of those who went to the festival, reasons included the strawberries and entertainment.
 - Noah: “I was in Sarasota, and I drove up to it and spent the day and had a great time and they did strawberries in, I don’t know how many different ways, and it was just a fun thing to go to.”
 - Nina: “It was just a fun day trip, educational for the kids.”

15 Seconds to Promote Florida Strawberries

At the end of each focus group session, participants were given the chance to provide advice to those seeking to promote Florida strawberries in 15 seconds.

- Much of the advice dealt with simply promoting strawberries more, especially through advertisements.
 - Jane: “And then also, I would like to suggest a commercial, advertising this new winter strawberry season that no one knows about, if it in fact, you know, if there’s a second season they should put something out about that, you know, get everybody hungry for strawberries.”
- Providing samples drove part of the proposed promotion.
 - Kim: “Let people see them as they go by and see how nice they is and give them a sample, one of them, taste it. It’s sweet and then hey, you got no problem with it.”
- Another part of the proposed promotion was building an identity for strawberries.
 - Tom: “Well, if I had 15 seconds, I would tell somebody that I think that Florida strawberries needs to have some sort of identity that they could market. And market it through not only televised marketing, but print advertising. And then tonight, we’ve heard a lot of people talk about buying pre-prepared type of fruit bowls or cut-up fruit, maybe to include some sort of sticker on the container of that product, that says that these strawberries that in this prepared fruit or whatever are from Florida.”
- Another common answer was connecting the strawberries as locally grown food.
 - Kurt: “Something showing it grown in Florida, you know, and stuff like that. And you could show people talking when you talk to them, say, ‘Hey, this, this, this, it’s on paper you know, it grow, and you know, stuff like that and location, you know. You can see go to the plant, you know, go to whatever it grow at and stuff like that.’ And convince somebody, you know, let them know, ‘Hey, you can go to the places, you might can’t go inside, but you can see where they grown at.’”
- Developing a quality product was another common response.
 - Josephina: “I think that marketing is irrelevant. I think if you put an excellent product out there, then it will sell itself.”
- Along the lines of providing a good product was promoting the nutritional value of strawberries
 - Angie: “I would tell them the healthiest fruit that you can eat are strawberries, the best ones are from Florida and look for their sign and buy them.”

- Finally, many of the participants mentioned the Fresh from Florida logo, which fits in with an earlier quote from Tom on developing an identity for Florida strawberries.
 - Kevin: “Make sure that . . . logo is noticeable because if it’s just real small, people might not notice it, but if it’s real noticeable, people might look at three different packages or brands of strawberries and go, ‘Oh, this one’s local’ and grab that one.”

Key Findings

Overall, there were four necessities affecting participants’ decisions to purchase strawberries. Without these four antecedents, Florida strawberries are unlikely to be successful in the long-term:

- Nutrition – This was an aspect of strawberries that, to a certain extent, could be taken for granted, but one of the motivations for purchasing strawberries was that it was perceived as nutritious, particularly when compared to other snacks, such as chips. This was a key motivator for purchasing strawberries. It was an assumed characteristic of strawberries, though participants may not have always known what the exact nutritional benefits of strawberries were.
- Good product – The participants expressed a preference for a good product. They looked at the strawberries to ensure they that the strawberries had the right color and were not moldy. They also had preferences for the time of year based on when they believed strawberries would be at their freshest. If the product was not fresh and did not taste good, it would not be bought. A good, nutritious product is a basic building block for developing an effective brand for Florida strawberries.
- Convenience – Convenience manifested in terms of Florida strawberries being available where participants were already purchasing food. While some participants were willing to go out of their way to get strawberries, many were unwilling to go somewhere other than the store they were already shopping at. In terms of communications, this means that any communication the Florida strawberry can engage in is unlikely to work if the strawberries were not stocked in convenient locations.
- Price – While participants’ thresholds varied, price was a factor in many participants’ decisions to purchase strawberries. Some participants were only purchasing strawberries when they were on sale or available as buy one, get one free from stores. Many also looked for strawberries when they believed that strawberries were less expensive. As a relationship between cost and convenience, many participants were unwilling to go out of their way for Florida strawberries even if they were less expensive. Participants in this instance believed the cost of fuel for driving between stores would negate any savings.

There were two additional criteria that were generally preferred but were not necessities for the majority of participants. While these criteria are not necessary for purchasing strawberries, they impact participants’ decisions to purchase Florida strawberries in particular. These criteria are also the most relevant for communicating about Florida strawberries:

- Local – Participants exhibited a general preference for locally produced strawberries, though they were often still willing to purchase non-local strawberries under certain circumstances (e.g., availability, price, freshness, and convenience). All things being equal, participants would be willing to purchase Florida strawberries over strawberries from other locations. This was due to the perception that locally produced strawberries would be fresher compared to imported strawberries. Some participants were willing to overcome barriers to certain degrees (e.g., willing to pay a little more versus being willing to pay a lot more, as perceived by the participants). For participants to be willing to pay a little bit extra for Florida strawberries, though, clear labeling that the

strawberries are from Florida, such as the Fresh from Florida labeling, is necessary. The Florida strawberry industry can have its largest communications-based impact on public knowledge by ensuring the public knows when Florida strawberries are available and making it clear on product labels that the product was grown in Florida. The impact is that the public makes positive assumptions about the product compared to competing locations of strawberries. Florida strawberries benefit from the positive associations.

- In season – In-season preferences were similar to preferences for buying strawberries from Florida. In both cases, the preference stems from the belief that in-season and local strawberries would be of a better quality than their alternatives. Many of the participants stated they would only purchase strawberries during certain times of the year due to perceived poor quality of out-of-season strawberries. While many of the participants preferred having Florida strawberries in season, they were not always knowledgeable of when that was. Coupled with not knowing the growing location of the strawberries they were purchasing, many participants were buying strawberries they believed were from Florida and in season based on cost and taste, when they were actually purchasing strawberries at the wrong time of year for this to be the case. As with knowledge of local strawberries, communication efforts are needed to let the public know when Florida strawberries are in season so they know when to look for them in stores. By communicating when Florida strawberries are available, the industry can improve the recognition of Florida strawberries, thereby increasing the likelihood the public will remember to purchase strawberries and look for Florida strawberries.

Recommendations

The recommendations for moving forward exist in four steps, the latter two being the most relevant to communications. More explanation will follow, but the first is to produce a good product, the second is to ensure the product is convenient, the third is to engage in communication to promote Florida strawberries as a local product, and the fourth is to use the preceding steps to establish and maintain an effective brand. These steps are progressive (Figure 1). Each step builds upon the preceding steps until reaching the final step of building an effective brand.



Figure 1. Pyramid of needs for building effective brand.

1. Good product (Base of the pyramid; Figure 1)– The first recommendation and the recommendation that is the most central for the success of the strawberry industry is to continue to provide a good product. This is the base of all branding efforts for Florida strawberry growers. People like strawberries. This was clear throughout the research. As it relates specifically to marketing and communication, sell those favored qualities to people, especially in terms of Florida strawberries being fresh and nutritious. The participants made the assumption that Florida strawberries in season would be fresh and nutritious, and the industry can amplify this effect by reinforcing it through its communications and promotions of Florida strawberries.
2. Convenient (2nd level of pyramid, Figure 1)– This refers to three aspects, availability in stores the public frequents, prices that the public considers affordable, and having a means to use strawberries.
 - a. For the first aspect, Florida strawberries need to be available in the stores the public shops at. Publix was the primary option for this study’s participants. Part of this aspect is making it easy for the public to know they were purchasing Florida-grown strawberries. Most participants did not pay attention to where their strawberries were from. Product labels are the area the strawberry industry has control over that give them the option to clearly indicate to the public the origin of the strawberries. In terms of broader communications, many members of the public are not going to know when Florida strawberries are in season, as indicated by the mixed levels of knowledge among focus group participants. The industry needs to communicate when Florida strawberries are available.
 - b. The second aspect of convenience is price. Again, communications cannot change the price of the product, but this is an aspect the industry needs to be aware of as it moves forward. While some participants were willing to pay a little more for a Florida-grown product, there was a limit to this

willingness and some participants were going to buy the less expensive product as long as it was a good product. The industry needs to make efforts to show that buying Florida strawberries is worth the price the public pays for the product. Examples include the health benefits of strawberries and the benefit on the local economy.

- c. The third aspect to improve convenience for Florida strawberries is to let the public know the different ways they can use fresh strawberries. Many participants purchased their foods and produce based on needs for recipes, so that is one option that can help improve the market for Florida strawberries for members of the public who do not snack on strawberries whole. Of note in this aspect are the six categories of uses (fresh, supplement/added to another dish, ingredient for a dish, drinks, sugar/chocolate added to strawberries, and preserve). While some members of the public may be aware of the variety of uses for strawberries, others are probably not aware of all the uses for fresh strawberries. Improving knowledge of the variety of uses could improve the market for Florida strawberries.
3. Promote as local product (3rd level of pyramid; Figure 1)– In general, the participants preferred local products over products that were imported from other countries or from across the country. They make assumptions about the freshness of the food and have generally positive associations with local products supporting state’s economy. In advertisements, promotions, and labeling, the industry should emphasize that the strawberries are a local product. Clearly communicating where the strawberries come from should be prioritized so that the public can easily find this information. Along these lines, use of the Fresh from Florida logo could be advantageous because it provides an over-arching brand to link all of Florida’s strawberries, in addition to building a brand for Florida’s products in general. In advertisements, the industry should tell people to look for the Fresh from Florida logo, should it become more widespread in its use. Another avenue to pursue is the use of local farmers when promoting Florida strawberries. This could increase the association between Florida strawberries and Florida’s workers and economy. The end goal is to leverage the positive associations the public has with Florida products into a stronger market and brand for Florida strawberries.
 4. Build an effective brand (Top of the pyramid; Figure 1) – In terms of long-term success for Florida strawberries, an effective brand needs to be established. Building an effective brand is a culmination of the previous steps to make Florida strawberries a cultural component in the same manner that many people purchase orange juice and milk without actively thinking about it or similar to how certain foods are expected to be eaten during specific seasons, which would be ideal for Florida strawberries. Basically, buying Florida strawberries in the winter would become habitual to a point that it would not even be an active decision; it would just occur. Again, this is a culmination of the previous steps. It involves creating awareness and knowledge of Florida strawberries by making it well-known when Florida strawberries are available. It involves increasing visibility and salience through consistent communication, such as use of the Fresh from Florida logo. It involves making sure the public knows how it can use Florida strawberries. And most importantly, it involves consistently growing a quality product. No communication tactic can overcome bad strawberries because quality interactions with the product will be the basis for all future brand development of Florida strawberries. If consumers have good experiences with the product they are likely to become brand loyal over time.

Appendix A: Label Scenarios



Appendix B: Billboard Options



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2



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