

Service separates distributor from competition

Working with farmers and customers, distributor meets needs of both

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EVERETT, Wash. - Mike Locking, co-owner of Shawn's Quality Produce of Everett, Wash., describes himself as a "separator."

"We have to separate ourselves from other distributors and processors because we're smaller and do produce exclusively," he said.

He takes pride in the company's ability to be able to take an order as late as 5 or 6 a.m. and get fresh or fresh-cut produce to the customer that same day.

"No one else does it," he said. "That's the separator. We're not big, but our customers know they can count on us."

Currently, 95 percent of 6 million pounds of produce the company distributes a year goes to restaurants - from exclusive white tablecloth establishments to small family-owned Mexican diners. The company, which employs 30 people, also supplies a hospital, a college, schools, motels, and convenience stores. It has recently expanded into the retail grocery market.

About 80 percent of the produce that Shawn's distributes is whole produce, the rest goes out fresh-cut.

Setting up a processing unit so he could supply customers with fresh-cut, vacuum-sealed packages or take-out containers of salads, fruit cups, coleslaw, vegetable assortments, julienned peppers, diced onions and tomatoes, to name just a few, gives Locking another way he can be a "separator."

"It helps level the playing field," Locking said, referring to the extra service he can offer to his customers.

Locking has been in the produce industry almost all of his working life. He said that at 20 years old he was the youngest high stall owner at Pike Place Market. From there he went to work for Associated Grocers, Consolidated Fruit and Food Services of America. But his current business is his first foray into processing.

With the poor economy, not as many people are going out to eat. That leaves Locking with the challenge of striking out into new territory.

Locking is confident that he can help farmers get their goods into grocery stores and restaurants and tap into the market of people hungry for locally grown, fresh food.

"One of the biggest tricks is getting the food from the grower to the end user," he said, referring to what he calls a "dysfunctional delivery system."



Mike Locking, co-owner of Shawn's Produce in Everett, Wash., stands next to a print depicting the stall he owned and worked at Seattle's Pike Place Market when he was in his 20s.

At the same time, farmers are reluctant to grow crops unless they know they'll have a market for them.

He's currently working with a nursery that's planning to convert its greenhouses into vegetable production.

"We're looking at things they should plant and discouraging them on things that are too labor intensive or that are already being produced in large quantities in the region," he said.

Locking is excited about this new endeavor.

"Ultimately, we'll be able to get more products circulated for our farmers than ever before," he said. "I think it's going to come together soon. It's going to be a nice marriage."

David Bauermeister, executive director of Northwest Agricultural Business Center, said that Locking is the right person in the right place at the right time.

"He sees the opportunity," Bauermeister said. "It's great for our farmers to have him working so hard to make it happen."

The Northwest Agricultural Business Center is a non-profit corporation funded in part by state and federal funds. It works to support agriculture economy in Northwest Washington and assists new and existing ag products or services businesses.