Value-adding for Samoan fruit and vegetable market vendors:

Waste less and sell more

A practical guide

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A CHALLENGING JOB

Selling fresh fruits and vegetables in South Pacific markets is a challenging job.

It can be difficult for market vendors to make a profit due to variable product quality caused by poor on-farm and transport practice, competition from other vendors, and changing consumer purchasing trends.

The cost of doing business has progressively increased as local councils and municipalities seek to re-coup their investment in market up-grades and new infrastructure. Rapid urbanisation and greater private vehicle ownership has made public access to many central municipal markets more difficult, leading to a steady rise in the number of private road-side markets. Western dietary trends and increased competition from cheap imported foods are influencing how much fresh fruits and vegetables Pacific Islanders are consuming.

It is not surprising then, that Pacific market vendors experience high rates of postharvest loss.

In an effort to overcome these challenges and better support the family income, vendors spend long-hours at the markets in the hope of making a sale.

There has to be a smarter way of doing business!

This book seeks to help Pacific market vendors increase their profit and reduce losses through simple and low-cost value-adding ideas that provide an alternative use for product that would otherwise be difficult to sell, and ways to create new potentially more profitable products.

The ideas and imagery were sourced from fruit and vegetable markets around the world. As such, this book is very much about vendors sharing their marketing ideas with other vendors.

(Below) The old and now closed Apia central municipal market, Samoa in November 2010.
USING VALUE-ADDING TO REDUCE WASTE

Most South Pacific fresh fruit and vegetable markets incur around 10-20% postharvest loss.

In recent studies [1,2,3], we know that the level of postharvest loss can vary considerably between markets and individual vendors. In Samoa, professional market vendors and those associated with road-side stalls tend to incur the lowest level of loss (compared to smallholder farmers trading through the municipal market). Given little difference in the product sold, the type of packaging used, or modes of transport, variable market operations and vendor practices may explain why some markets and vendors are better able to minimise their losses. While poor market vendor handling practices are often observed, the limited number of customers visiting some markets resulting in prolonged product storage, is thought to have a profound effect on postharvest market loss in Samoa. The longer product needs to be stored in the markets the greater the level of postharvest loss [1]. Even with the adoption of better postharvest handling practices, if there are few potential customers you are still likely to incur high-levels of postharvest loss.

This presents the question, how do Samoan market vendors better attract customers so they can waste less and sell more?

The answer may involve adopting some simple value-adding techniques and products.

“Value-adding is a simple way to make more money. It is also an effective strategy for reducing potential postharvest loss.”

Professional market vendors or road-side stalls tend to be more successful in reducing their losses because they provide some level of value-adding benefit to their customers. Based on consumer surveys, we know that product sold through road-side stalls is considered to be fresher than that sold in the municipal markets. Moreover, the ease and convenience of buying through a road-side stall is highly prized by Samoans – “I don’t even need to get out of my car.” Professional market vendors on the other-hand adopt a more business-like manner, focussing on convenience, quality, and presentation. While the product might be similar, there is a clear value proposition from the customer’s point of view. The Taufusi private market in Apia is a great example of a successful consumer-centric value-adding market, as it has drive-through convenience, consumer service, good quality product, effective product displays, and some vendors selling surplus or poorer quality product to local bakeries.

Value-adding is the process of modifying a product in some way to make it more appealing and/or convenient to consumers. Done correctly, value-adding can increase vendor profit margins by creating higher prices, increasing the overall volume of sales, and/or reducing the level of product loss due to spoilage.

Value-adding commonly involves some form of minimum processing to create a new product. Value-adding can also be achieved through changes in how, where and when a product is presented to consumers, and/or through providing consumer services that make it easier, quicker or simpler for consumers to buy your product.

In order to be commercially successful value-adding products need to be part of the marketing strategy. Innovative value-added products that do not connect with the consumer’s needs or expectations are unlikely to be successful.
The trick is to identify unrealised or emerging value-adding opportunities that might be unique to your consumers or market situation. Many successful value-adding strategies are often targeted towards a specific consumer group. What one consumer might consider as a highly desirable value-added product, might have little appeal to another.

The collective goal is meeting or exceeding consumer needs.

Value-adding requires a level of thought and planning. For example, we know that there are an increasing number of tourists visiting the markets as the number of cruise ship arrivals steadily grows. Given cruise-ship arrivals are known in advance, we even know the day there are likely to be more tourists in the markets. So, what type of products might a tourist be willing to purchase from fruit and vegetable vendors as he or she walks around the market - certainly not a piece of taro!

Conversely, if you have a great product, but nobody seems to be interested in buying it, how well are you actually promoting the fact that your product is better in some way?

Value-adding strategies and techniques suitable for Pacific fruit and vegetable market vendors can loosely be classified based on:

1. Creating New Products
2. Novel Packaging
3. Product Display
4. Value-adding through Service

In this book we will explore these four strategies, using commercial examples from other market vendors.
CREATING NEW PRODUCTS – fruit salads

The South Pacific is a global success story in terms of its expanding tourism market. The number of cruise ships arriving each month is clear evidence of this. How can a fruit and vegetable market vendor capitalise on this opportunity?

Takeaway “grab and go” fruit salads common in tourist markets in Europe is one idea.
Tricks-of-the-Trade

- Create distinct layers using contrasting colours to make it visually appealing. Try to use at least 3-4 different types of fruits.
- A slice of coconut or exotic fruit on top creates a more “tropical feel” for tourist.
- Consider mixing different strong flavours. Relatively sharp favoured products such as soursop or citrus can complement relatively sweet fruits such as mango and banana.
- Use cheap or in-season fruit to bulk up the product.
- If you are using highly perishable fruits such as berries, avoid placing these at the bottom of the container.
- Placing product on bright green leaves gives the impression of enhanced freshness.
- Use ice to extend the product shelf-life.
- Poor texture is often a signal to consumers that the product is not fresh. If the product is warm, it can also give the impression of having poor texture.
- Include a long skewer to make it easier and less messy to eat.
- You want to show off the product inside so always use clear plastic cups.
- Given this type of product is particularly appealing to children and tourists. The best time to sell is when cruise ships arrive or when there is more likely to be families with young children in the market.
- A road-side stall near the local ferry or cruise liner drop-off area, or near a bus terminal would be a popular place to sell.

Food safety needs to be demonstrated, not just practiced.

Product placed in a clear display cabinet away from flies is more likely to sell. Never add ice to the fruit salad, as tourist are commonly told to avoid drinks with ice due to water-safety concerns. Instead create a layer of ice in the bottom of the display cabinet to keep the product cold.
CREATING NEW PRODUCTS – carved fruit

Market vendors in Fiji produce an array of carved fruit – often pineapples – to sell (see photograph below). These products are increasing in popularity in Fiji. Carved fruit is also frequently sold in the wet markets and by street vendors in South-East Asia.

Pineapple carving designs need to be quick and simple to do, and also create little wastage.

(Below) An impressive display of carved pineapple pieces in the Suva municipal market, Fiji.
There are numerous YouTube clips available that outline various tools and techniques for quickly carving pineapples.

A good starting point is: https://youtu.be/wXOnAfPNxJQ or https://youtu.be/2HG3vWdmvBk

**Tricks-of-the-Trade**

- It is important to retain a small part of the crown or alteratively provide skewers to make it easier to eat.
- Cut or carved pineapple is a convenience food, so keep the size of the product to a single serve, i.e. a 5kg carved pineapple might look impressive but is unlikely to be sold.
- It is very important that the product is held in a sealed display cabinet away from flies. Some vendors in Fiji use ice in their display cabinet to extend shelf-life.
- Display cabinets are normally re-purposed old fish tanks or wooden shelves. Market vendors in Fiji pay the equivalent of around $80-$100 Samoan Tala to have a wooden cabinet especially built.
- If you plan to build your own, consider a design that is easy to clean.
- Consumers sub-consciously assess overall food safety risk when deciding to buy. Is the work area clean and tidy? Is the vendor wearing clean clothes? Has the product been washed in clean water? Given your target market is likely to be mothers purchasing for children or tourists – perceived food safety will be a key purchasing decision.
(Above) Cut to order pineapple slices (as seen in the Honiara municipal market) are sometimes given away to potential consumers to prove the sweetness and freshness of the product for sale.

This *try-before-you-buy* technique is particularly useful when the market is flooded with product (see below) and there is a lot of vendor competition for the customer.
While fruit display-cabinets are common in Pacific fresh fruit and vegetable markets, they are rarely seen in Samoa.

The photographs below were taken in the Labasa, Suva, (Fiji) and Honiara (Solomon Islands) markets.
(Above, Below) Examples of various display cabinets seen in the Honiara municipal market. Designs whereby the shelves can be easily removed and washed are a better option in terms of food safety compliance. Do not store non-food items in the cabinets after use (as shown above) as this might increase the risk of food safety contamination.
CREATING NEW PRODUCTS – healthy fruit juices and smoothies

The one thing all Pacific fruit and vegetable markets have in common is that its normally hot and humid! That means a lot of potentially thirsty consumers walking around the markets.

It is common to see cold coconut drinks and iced water for sale and sometimes cordial fruit drinks. What is far less common, is market vendors selling locally made fruit juices and fruit smoothies.

There are a few market vendors in Port Vila who occasionally sell locally-made fruit and vegetable juices which they promote as health-tonics. In Fiji (photograph below) market vendors sell iced-cordial drinks, overlooking the fact that there is an abundance of other options. In European fruit and vegetable markets, vendors use small blenders to make on-demand fruit juices.

Access to power in the markets can be a common impediment for market vendors blending their own juices. For around $50-$100 Tala there are a range of cheap fruit blenders available online that have rechargeable batteries.

If you are looking for inspiration for fruit juice blends, there are a lot of popular recipes available online.

http://www.health.com/health/gallery/0,,20559953,00.html#juice-blender-bender-0
https://greenblender.com/smoothies/5021/tropical-fruit-smoothie-recipe
CREATING NEW PRODUCTS – discount foods

Creating discount food lines does not necessarily mean reducing profit margins. Market vendors in Fiji sell packs of trimmed mixed fruits or vegetables, using product that may be bruised or have some surface blemishing. These discounted products are not only popular with Pacific consumers, but are a way of reducing potential food loss for the vendor.

Cut apples and pears will quickly brown. However, there are a few simple ways to slow down this process.

- Soaking the fruit in fresh clean water for 5-10 minutes (no longer) after it is cut
- Or soak the cut fruit in salty water for 3-5 mins (1/2 teaspoon of salt per one Litre of fresh clean water)
- Or apply a small amount of fresh lemon or citrus juice to the end sections. This often effects the taste, and only provides moderate benefit
(Above) Trimmings from leafy vegetables, such as head cabbage, are often thrown away or given to pigs. When carefully sorted and re-packed, cabbage trimmings can create a discount product line for consumers.

(Below) Price-sensitive Pacific Island consumers often avoid buying out-of-season fruits and vegetables, unfamiliar crops or over-sized products, due to the added price normally associated with such crops. This decision not to purchase can be influenced by cutting the product up into reduced portion sizes with an associated lower price point. Consumer value is achieved by simply lowering the net outlay cost to purchase.
Market vendors sometimes organise a set time of the day to sell their left-over or unsold product.

In the Honiara market, Solomon Islands this is called “crazy sale” and tends to occur in the late afternoon each day. The volume of consumers in the markets during this period can also double (see photograph below), creating a great opportunity for vendors to clear stock.

One of the risks of the “crazy sale” strategy is that customers only visit the market during this period. To address this, it is best to limit “crazy sale” to the last few hours of the market trading period, for vendors to only discount their highly-perishable products, and to consider reducing the size of bundles or heaps to create a lower price point.

*Discount food lines work best when the customer is anticipating a bargain*

As the number of customers tends to dramatically increase during market “crazy sale”, aim to have discounted prices clearly visible and minimise product on the floor to make access easier. Also try to avoid any product arriving into the market during this period, you want to sell your old-stock first.

(Below) “Crazy sale” at the Honiara market can attract a large number of potential consumers. This is the best time to sell discounted food lines. Customers are looking for bargains!
CREATING NEW PRODUCTS – minimum processed

Food convenience is often overlooked by Pacific market vendors, however in some markets, especially those around Suva and Nausori in Fiji, there is an increasing trend towards selling semi-prepared foods.

Diced or cut vegetable products are widely sold.

However, minimum processed fruits and vegetables require careful preparation, handling and in-market storage to comply with food safety standards.

Food preparation areas that are not clean or where there are poor hygiene practices, can create product that is not only unsafe to eat, but a major safety risk to consumers.
(Above) Mixed pre-cut vegetables are best prepared with a specific popular dish or meal in mind. This European market vendor is promoting this leafy vegetable blend for inclusion in a popular Italian soup.

(Below) This Fijian market vendor has prepared a range of cut vegetables to be used in a series of popular Indian dishes.
Minimum processing should only be considered if you have:

- Access to clean and safe drinking-quality water.
- Knives, cutting boards and bowls that are cleaned daily and not used for any non-food preparation purposes.
- Product that has been well washed before cutting.
- Product that is covered or protected after preparation.

You should also use disposable (single use) plastic gloves and have a suitable container (with a lid) available to store the product.

The photograph below and on the next page were taken at the 2017 Samoan Agricultural Show and illustrate good food safety practice.
CREATING NEW PRODUCTS - organically grown

Consumers consider organic products as having greater value. There is a strong movement to promote organic fruits and vegetables across the Pacific, coupled with numerous organisations and initiatives that seek to help farmers adopt more organically-compliant production practices. However, there is a disconnect when it comes to the municipal markets, with very few examples of market vendors promoting or selling crops that have been sourced from a certified organic farming system.

The photograph below from the Fugalei market in Samoa in 2017, is one of the few examples I have seen in the South Pacific of an organic market vendor stall. However, be sure to display some supporting information or a certificate to verify that your product is organic.

You cannot claim product is organic if it is not.

More information about sourcing and selling organically certified fresh fruits and vegetables in Samoa can be obtained from Women in Business Development, Apia.

https://www.womeninbusiness.ws/contact.html
NOVEL PRODUCT PACKAGING

How product is packaged can improve consumer convenience and product appeal.

A common strategy is packing a range of different crops together as a single product line. This technique works well when there is a focus on increasing consumer convenience. For example, selecting products used to prepare a popular local meal or recipe and only including the necessary portion sizes required to avoid consumers purchasing more than they need.

A mixed leafy Asian vegetable pack is a good example.

(Above) Mixed vegetable packs being sold in a New Zealand road-side market.
Mixed leafy vegetables being sold in a Canadian farmer’s market.
While vendors need to explore innovative packaging ideas, we need to also consider the importance of minimising potential future environmental waste. Unfortunately, there are still relatively few examples of environmentally sustainable and affordable fresh fruit and vegetable packaging options available to Pacific market vendors.

**Things to Consider**

- Most Pacific Island nations are endeavouring to reduce their use of non-biodegradable plastic bags and containers. Market vendors need to be mindful of the potential flow-on implications of an increased use of plastic bags on the environment.

- Internationally, retailers are moving towards various alternative paper and cardboard-based packing options.

- If you do not use plastic packaging, be sure you promote this to your customers, for example “We value the environment and do not use plastic”.

(Opposite) A roadside vendor market in Honiara, Solomon Islands, highlighting the risk of excessive market rubbish.
PRODUCT DISPLAY

While we normally think about product displays as a marketing technique rather than a value-adding strategy, how, when and where product is displayed is critical in achieving a value-adding benefit.

Supermarkets and road-side vendors often do this very effectively.

In supermarkets in the Pacific, fresh fruits and vegetables tend to be well displayed, often in refrigerated cabinets inferring elevated food safety and hygiene. Product is also commonly pre-packaged in convenient sizes and there is wide range of product for sale.

Road-side vendors instead focus on customer convenience, with stalls placed near major roads, bus stops or adajacent to shopping centres. When consumers were surveyed as to why they choose to buy from Pacific road-side markets, interestingly a common response was that the product is considered to be fresher than that available at municipal markets. This perception of freshness can be further reinforced when the vendor stall is located within close proximity to the farm, or when the road-side vendor only trades for short periods of time. The collective value-adding proposition here is consumer convenience and perceived product freshness and safety.

(Above) A commercial retail outlet in Samoa with a good fresh fruit and vegetable display. This type of display is what municipal market vendors in Samoa are increasingly going to have to compete with. Highly professional supermarket fruit and vegetable displays are rapidly re-shaping Pacific consumer expectations.
This visually stunning fresh fruit and vegetable display in Italy clearly demonstrates...
By contrast, the display of fruits and vegetables in Pacific municipal markets to create consumer appeal is rarely considered.

Elsewhere, market vendors invest a lot of time and thought into making their market stall attractive to consumers.

The market vendors in the Nuku'alofa market in Tonga and those in Port Vila, Vanuatu are particularly effective in how they present their product for sale.

( Opposite ) Chinese market vendors in the Nuku'alofa market use small florescent lamps to draw attention to their displays.

**Things to Consider**

- There are going to be numerous market vendors all competing for the same consumers. Your market stall needs to be visually appealing! It must stand out in the crowd.
- When vendor stalls sell just one product or a limited selection of product it means that the consumer has to make numerous purchases from different vendors. This involves more time and effort. It is much more convenient for a consumer if they can make one single transaction. Partner-trading, whereby a few vendors work together to establish a larger stall with a wider range of product can create a significant market advantage in terms of attracting consumers to your stall.
- Aim to keep your display area fully stocked or if supply is an issue, try to limit the display area used for each product line. A small and sparse display will give the consumer the impression they are buying the dregs or someone else’s rejects.
- Use signage to promote your stall. This could include telling the customer that it was grown, “farm-fresh,” is “organic,” was “picked today,” or has “no-chemicals.”
- Consider designing your stall in a way that maximises available space. For example, product could be hung from a simple frame or arranged into a tiered display. Avoid putting product on the ground if possible, as it can make access to your stall difficult and could also create a food safety risk.
1. Selling product with leaves or shoots still attached gives the impression that the product is fresher and has had less handling.

2. Placing red-coloured products on a green background makes the product standout. Conversely, red and blue background colours can make the product look dull and less attractive.

3. Using fresh green ferns or interesting shaped leaves to display your product can improve its visual appeal and increases perceived freshness.

4. Using wooden display baskets and straw can give the impression product is more natural. This technique is widely used by retailers when selling organic fruits and vegetables.
(Above) A well organised tiered display bench. This is particularly useful for road-side vendors whose product must be clearly visible from a distance.

(Below) This vendor has included a range of other non-food related products in their display. This not only visually adds to the display but also creates additional items for sale.
(Above) An example of a Fijian market vendor who has created a simple three-dimensional display by hanging up bunches of bananas.

(Below) This road-side market vendor in New Zealand, has used a range of decorative items such as flowers and pine cones to enhance the visual appeal of their stall.
VALUE-ADDING THROUGH SERVICE

The concept of consumer service is integral to retail shopping, but rarely considered by Pacific market vendors. Consider your most recent trip to the supermarket; you would likely have encountered trolleys or baskets to place your groceries in, labels on products indicating its use-by-date, packaging to ensure product remains clean while on display and possibly information on how to cook the product or new recipe suggestions. Further, the supermarket would have been in a convenient location with ample free parking.

In comparison, consumer-service at the typical Pacific municipal market involves a vendor having a range of different crops placed on a bench in small piles, a few price labels, and an unrealistic expectation of consumers lining up to buy their product, which by the way is exactly the same product offered for sale by all the other vendors.

In terms of trying to improve consumer-service, we need to consider exactly what the consumer is seeking.

The “Barrow-Boys”

In the Suva municipal market, consumers can hire the “barrow-boys” to follow them around with a wheel barrow and collect product as it is purchased. Because of the limited parking in Suva and the fact that cars are likely to have been parked some distance away, the service provided by the “barrow-boys” is critical to many consumers. This service allows consumers to buy bulk volumes, which would otherwise be impractical to transport.
In Suva, even though the municipal market is adjacent to the central bus depot, this still involves consumers having to carry product at least 50 meters.

Without the “barrow-boys”, consumers only buy what they can easily carry to the bus, and you as the market vendor miss out on a potential sale. This issue of transport convenience, is the reason why road-side market stalls are becoming increasingly more popular throughout the Pacific.

If you are selling heavy and bulky product such as taro, or are located in a market where parking is limited or incurs parking fees, consider getting one or two-wheel barrows, with the view of providing a market-to-car / bus stop transport service for your consumers.

(Above) Wheelbarrows located next to the bus stop in Suva, Fiji, ready to transport product to and from the market.
CONCLUSIONS AND KEY MESSAGES

High levels of postharvest loss is currently occurring in some Samoan markets.

To improve profitability and reduce food loss, vendors need to consider a different approach. Selling the same product as everyone else and waiting for someone to hopefully buy is clearly not working!

Samoan market vendors need to be smarter in what, where and how they sell their fresh fruits and vegetables.

The simple and low-cost value-adding ideas presented in this book cover a range of possible strategies to attract consumers to the markets.

Given that these ideas have been sourced from market vendors elsewhere, they can be adopted relatively cheaply and are proven to be commercially viable.

However, for value-adding strategies to be successful you need to ensure that you know your consumers. In particular:

✓ What will create convenience for them?
✓ How do they determine quality?
✓ What currently influences their purchasing decisions?
✓ What are they looking to buy?
✓ How can you gain their trust and support?

We also need to remember that there are numerous different types of consumer groups, each with slightly different expectations and needs.

Successful fruits and vegetable market vendors know exactly what their customers want and work hard to provide products or services that exceed their expectations.

REFERENCES
