

GREEN FLEET OF THE YEAR



Veritable Vegetable

Organic produce distributor shows how any size fleet can set a good example

By **Brian Straight** | managing editor

Back in the 1970s, long before organic living became the preferred lifestyle for so many in this country, the San Francisco Bay Area was home to a vibrant, locally grown food network focused on procuring healthy food products. This system, called the People's Food System, created an alternative to the dominant food system in place at the time. Nearly 40 years later, San Francisco has moved this alternative system into the mainstream. Throughout this entire period, Veritable Vegetable (VV) has continued to move organic produce, becoming the nation's oldest organic produce company.

Veritable Vegetable provides full service distribution of organic fresh fruits and vegetables to retailers, restaurants, schools, corporate campuses and wholesalers. Located in San Francisco, VV's distribution area covers California and includes parts of Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and Nevada. In addition to providing leadership in establishing and expanding the organic agriculture industry, VV focuses on utilizing green technologies to reduce energy consumption and waste at every level of the company, including its truck





When looking for a new green technology, Veritable Vegetable's approach is not bottom-line driven.

fleet, and for those efforts, the company has been named *Fleet Owner's* 2012 Green Fleet of the Year.

As distribution became a critical part of the People's Food System, Veritable Vegetable was founded to meet that need, distributing produce from farms to various buying clubs around the city. "The movement started with people participating in buying clubs in different neighborhoods," relates Mary Jane Evans, CEO & one of three co-owners of Veritable Vegetable. "As people's participation grew, the size of the buying clubs overwhelmed the garages the clubs were operating out of, and they had to become storefronts." The People's Food System eventually grew to 11 storefronts. Throughout its growth, though, a need developed—to bring produce from farm to fork, as they say.

"I began working with the company in the fall of '76 and we kind of re-founded the company," Evans remembers. "Veritable Vegetable started when distribution became a component of the People's Food System, hauling food from farms to warehouses and storefronts. We really started to understand organic agriculture and the need to get produce to market. The idea was to support organic farmers by moving their product to the stores."

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

As part of this effort, Veritable Vegetable believed it was important to promote sustainable agriculture and to extend the community's understanding about organic food and agricultural issues. The company's founding principles, proudly proclaimed on its website, include collaboration, cooperation and interconnect- edness, and it remains committed to the original unifying principle of the People's Food System, "food for people, not for profit."

Guided by Evans and fellow co-owners Bu Nygrens and Karen Salinger, VV takes pride in its values-based approach as a model for all business decisions. "We're fundamentally focused on how we interact with the environment," Evans says. This is apparent throughout the company. VV operates three warehouses in the San Francisco area, one of which is equipped with 570 solar panels on its roof that offset 70% of

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the electricity used at the company. Veritable Vegetable also sends only 1% of its waste to landfills, recycling or reusing the remainder.

According to David Benson, produce manager at Briar Patch Community Market, a natural food market in Grass Valley, CA, what Evans describes is truly the way Veritable Vegetable operates. "It's about farmers, it's about customers," Benson says, adding that VV delivers four times a week to the market. "We support them with the lion's share of our business. When I train new produce clerks, I tell them [Veritable Vegetable] is responsible for family organic agriculture in California because they've been with the family farms since the beginning."

Benson, who worked as an order picker for Veritable Vegetable, says one of the keys to their success is with whom Veritable Vegetable chooses to do business. "One of the things I noticed when I was pulling [orders] for Briar Patch was Veritable always picked the best growers," Benson points out.

In addition, VV also genuinely cares about those growers, according to Kerri Williams, produce manager at Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op. "I really enjoy working with them rather than other companies because it's about the farms with them," Williams says. "They facilitate the farms to make sure we get the product we need."

The Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op, which first opened its doors in 1973, expanded through the years, including a major relocation and expansion effort in 1989 that placed a renewed focus on organic produce. In fact, Williams points out that the co-op has the largest organic produce department in the U.S., and almost all of that produce is delivered by Veritable Vegetable six times a week.

"They were very instrumental in the growth we've had

here at the co-op,” Williams says. “At the time we started, we weren’t that into organic produce, but then we doubled our size [and they were right there to help us.] They have bent over backwards in every way to help us.”

To help further its sustainable mantra, if you will, Veritable Vegetable looks for environmental opportunities where they best fit. And that even extends to the packaging it uses to secure product to pallets. The company is currently testing a reusable wrap from Pallet Wrapz, which would eliminate a large amount of plastic waste. “Basically, it wraps straps around the pallet and you Velcro it down,” says Chris Adams, transportation manager. According to Pallet Wrapz, the product can be wrapped around a skid and tied down and then unwrapped in less than a minute, saving labor time. The company goes on to say that the product, which can be used up to 1,000 times before it needs to be replaced, can save a company up to \$300,000 a year in labor and materials if it wraps 500 six-foot pallets a day.

A BRAND EXTENSION

The company’s commitment to sustainable business practices is perhaps most notable in its decision to operate a modern and clean fleet of vehicles. “Ensuring our product stays fresh, and to avoid breakdowns, we need to have state-of-the-art equipment,” Evans says. “We are a part of our community and we want every part of our company to contribute positively—that is why we keep our trucks clean and invest in green technologies.

“We’re not bottom-line driven,” Evans points out. “We have a pay ratio of 4:1, top to bottom. What we’re looking to do is consider what is most beneficial in the long term. We have found that responsibility does yield savings over time, but it’s necessary to take a long view.

“Partially because of the pay scale, and partially due to the modern equipment, drivers tend to remain with Veritable Vegetable,” Evans says.

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On the fleet itself, which travels more than 1.75 million miles annually, Veritable Vegetable is proof positive that size does not matter. The company operates a mix of vehicles, from Sprinter vans to Freightliner M2s, Peterbilt 385, 386, and 378 models, Kenworth T660s, and six Kenworth hybrids.

Fleet transportation systems manager Tom Howard and Adams are focused on the long term, seeking to maximize every tenth of a mile per gallon. According to Howard, a Kenworth T370 hybrid truck is saving the company about 215 gals. per month. “I figure that one truck is saving us \$900 per month,” Howard says, when compared to a non-hybrid unit. Kenworth T270 hybrid straight trucks reduce fuel consumption by about 58 gals. per 1,000 mi. run with the average VV straight truck covering 60,000 mi./year. The T370 tractors save about 36 gals. per 1,000 mi., although they offer a slightly longer payback period as they travel about half the annual miles of the straight trucks.

“The 24-ft. straight trucks are getting much better mileage than their predecessors,” Howard notes, pointing out that the vehicles are achieving 9 mpg vs. just 7.2 mpg for their non-hybrid predecessors.

Howard says the average hybrid costs the fleet about \$37,000 more than a traditional diesel-only vehicle, but between grants and tax credits that Veritable Vegetable has been awarded and out-of-pocket fuel savings, a return on investment could be realized just two years after the purchase of each vehicle.

“It’s gratifying to see such a well-run organization, dedi-



Veritable Vegetable provides full-service distribution of organic fresh fruits and vegetables.

cated to distributing organically grown food, being recognized for its commitment to an environmentally sustainable operation,” says Gary Moore, Kenworth general manager and Paccar vice president. “They practice what they preach and we’re proud of the role that the company’s Kenworth hybrids have played in their environmental stewardship.”

GOING AUTOMATED

Unfortunately, hybrid vehicles do not suit every route that Veritable Vegetable services. To run the longer routes, the company utilizes Kenworth T660s with Eaton UltraShift Plus automated mechanical transmissions (AMT). One of these trucks, Howard says, is a 2012 model that is achieving around 7 mpg, which is up nearly a full mpg over a 13-spd. manual transmission truck it replaced. While Howard cautions that it’s impossible to draw any conclusions since the trucks are different makes and models, and were not driven by the same driver under the same conditions, he is nonetheless pleased with the performance.

Adams adds that while the automated transmissions have been a benefit in many respects, the most positive aspect of them has been in driver comfort. “Mechanically they’ve been very reliable,” she says. “The drivers have had no trouble adapting to them. I have one driver who has a back injury and he’s very comfortable because he doesn’t have to shift. I have another who [has had rotator cuff problems] and he, too, is more comfortable because he’s not always shifting.”

On its long-haul tractors, VV employs battery-powered auxiliary power units (APUs), Webasto Product North America diesel heaters, and are equipped with idle shutdown technology to turn off the engines after 3 min. of idle time.

Green technologies don’t just permeate the truck and tractor fleet, they are also a vital part of the trailer inventory. VV has 17 refrigerated trailers, nine of which are 48-ft. units. Mostly comprised of Utility Trailer VS2RA models, the fleet includes Carrier Transicold Vector 6500 hybrid refrigeration units installed on 10 of the trailers.

The Vector 6500 is a single-temperature all-electric unit that produces very little noise, according to Carrier Transicold. The company points out that the units, when operating in standby operation, eliminate engine emissions from the refrigeration unit, conserve fuel, and reduce operating costs by 40 to 70%. According to Howard, each unit runs about 2,800 hours per year, making the hybrid technology a perfect fit.

Going beyond hybrid refrigeration, Veritable Vegetable outfitted its entire 48-ft. trailer fleet with ATDynamics’ trailer skirts. The skirts, which VV tested for a year, cost the company about \$1,700 apiece and provide a \$1,300 savings each per year, Howard says.

“[Installation] was done because we had a skirt on one trailer and we pulled it for about 90,000 mi. It was pulled by different tractors and different drivers, and we got a 3% improvement across the board,” he points out. Fully installed, Veritable Vegetable is saving about 4,775 gals. of fuel per year just by using the skirts.

The trailers, like the entire fleet, run on Bridgestone low-profile 22.5-in. tires with Bridgestone Bandag Tire Solutions FuelTech recaps. To keep those tires properly inflated, Veri-



About 65% of Veritable Vegetable’s employee mix is female, led by co-owners Mary Jane Evans (left), Karen Salinger (rear), and Bu Nygrens (right).

table Vegetable employs the Meritor Tire Inflation System (MTIS) by PSI, maintaining 100 psi at all times. MTIS uses compressed air from the trailer’s air system to inflate any tire that falls below a preset pressure whenever the vehicle is in operation.

To further cut down on wind resistance, the fleet installed the Deflektor, a wheel insert that reduces wind resistance, on its trailer’s wheels. To show how Howard and Adams leave no stone unturned in their quest for improvement, Howard relates he first learned of the Deflektor when seeing it profiled in a magazine. After investigating, he quickly became a believer in the device.

DRIVING SMARTER

While Veritable Vegetable reviews all the latest on-vehicle technologies in its efforts to reduce fuel consumption, it does not stop there. Adams is constantly looking at the efficiency in routing as well.

“We always look for the shortest distance between two points,” she says, adding that traffic conditions, particularly for drivers hauling into Los Angeles and Phoenix, are always a concern. “We have shifted lately to have the trucks leave earlier. In fact, we’ve shifted everything including the warehouse operations to get the trucks out earlier. ... That change has happened over the last couple of years.”

Veritable Vegetable is also certified to backhaul. So while its trucks may head to a delivery point full of organic produce, they may return stacked with micro-brews. “We do a fair amount [of backhauls] and we’re trying to build up that business,” Adams says, “because [it makes no sense to] have a truck that’s empty when you can have it full.”

And because the trailers are kept at 38-40 deg. F, almost any commodity, including dry freight, can be mixed with produce. “It’s really an ideal shipping temperature,” Howard says.



Hauling all that produce, though, requires a large number of pallets. To reduce costs and improve the environment, Veritable Vegetable now utilizes mostly reusable plastic pallets. “They’re recycled plastic,” says Adams. “When we make a delivery, there is a charge on the invoice for pallet return.” In most cases, Adams points out, the pallet exchange results in an even swap as drivers will pick up unused pallets in a 1 to 1 ratio with dropped pallets.

TRAINING DRIVERS

As most fleets know, the biggest factor contributing to reduced fuel usage is drivers. At Veritable Vegetable, the quest for the ideal driver training system is still ongoing, but Adams says she’s found the company’s best system so far is a pair of driving veterans. “We’re looking for the right program but haven’t found a good fit yet,” she says. “I have two drivers now that do the training, acting as mentors. What I’ve found is that if I have a new driver and they’re trained by a good driver, then I have two good drivers.”

Adams and Howard are also exploring potential driver-incentive programs and systems that provide drivers instant feedback on their actions and driving behaviors. “We’re try-

“We are embracing the truck fleet and trying to educate people on how important it is in moving the food.”

ing to figure out the best way to train people, and it’s becoming an area that is [increasingly] difficult with CSA and other regulatory hurdles,” Adams says.

Despite being a relatively small fleet as measured by some standards, there is nothing small about how Veritable Vegetable attacks the challenges facing its truck fleet. “We put our financial resources towards these kinds of things,” Adams says. “We’re not a public company, we don’t have to answer to shareholders. We want to return the highest price we can to the grower” and the best way to do that is to operate efficiently.

And with all it has accomplished, Veritable Vegetable’s fleet is a source of pride for the organization. “We are embracing the truck fleet and trying to educate people on how important it is in moving the food,” Evans says. 🚚