Engage, engage and engage

As the world’s fresh produce family met in Berlin in February, it was a case of “engage, engage and engage”, as opposed to last year’s policy of “touch, pause, engage”. That is not to say that there is less caution this year, rather it is a signal that most exporters have established who to partner with during these difficult times.

Those in the supply chain who stood with the South African fruit industry through thick and thin are now being chosen to continue engaging with, rather than the walk in opportunists that arrive on the stand at events like Fruit Logistica. This is because recession economics – low supply, low demand and low prices – creates a difficult environment within which to survive, let alone prosper. Reports that the recession is over seem to depend on statistics and wishful thinking, rather than reflecting the reality that most consumers have taken a hit on their disposable income, and are looking for the best deals in town, and are much more circumspect in their selections, thus reducing waste. It was estimated in the past that up to thirty percent of fresh produce purchased ended up as waste! In the present economic climate, consumers want to consume all they purchase – thus purchasing small amounts more often, and testing firmness and soundness in the store.

Department Trade and Industry once again did the fruit industries proud in putting together an excellent stand at this year’s Fruit Logistica. South Africa is a leading fruit exporter into the EU and as such it is appropriate that the South African flag is flown high and proud at the event. The stand was a buzz of activity for the full three days – it is a vital meeting place to renew old acquaintances and develop new friendships. Personnel from DTI and FPEF must be commended for their professional manner and hospitality shown to all visitors.

South Africa’s commitment to this market is further underlined by the massive investment in market development by the deciduous fruit industry, table grape and grapefruit growers’. The UK campaign got under way with a launch event in January, and will finish with grapefruit in July. Success in this campaign will pave the way for greater support in the future.

So with 2010 optimism flowing through all South African’s veins, most feel that the year should be profitable for those who are fully engaged!!

Hugo Skoppek, director Nature & More Foundation, The Netherlands, wrote the following:

Dear Madam,

On a recent trip visiting sustainable farmers in South Africa, I picked up a copy of your ‘Fruit Journal’. I was very impressed with the quality of the articles in it. In my opinion you covered many important sustainable issues such as post harvest handling, responsible energy use, climate change, healthy eating in schools, etc. However, what impressed me most were the two extensive contributions on soil health. I particularly compliment you on these.

Having been involved in sustainable farming for more than 25 years I can only confirm the importance of soil health with regards to agricultural production. I remember the days when making compost and increasing the humus content of the soil was something only ‘old fashioned’ organic farmers did – and they frequently were laughed at by their neighbors. Therefore, I am delighted that composting has made it into a main stream magazine like yours.

I have met many conventional farmers who return to organic compost due to the fact that the price of chemical fertilizer increases. But, many of them have not (yet) realized the real benefits which such humus rich compost can have. Allow me to summarize that humus rich organic compost does not only improve soil fertility (which has a positive effect on plant health and the final quality of the crops). It plays a vital role in averting climate change. Soils high in organic matter have the ability to bind greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane. Compost also increases the soil’s water retention by as much as 50% (which makes your plants more drought resistant and reduces unnecessary irrigation).

Several of the growers I have visited confirmed those benefits of having applied compost in their orchards and vineyards. One of them reports that a particular variety of grape even had a higher yield following two seasons of compost application, while another one proudly shared the story of a European buyer who complimented him on the ‘best tasting grapes he ever bought’.

This is praise indeed – and provided profitable returns. I can only encourage South African growers to take a look at sustainable practices. Without doubt using compost is an excellent way to start.

In the long run the goal is to make the farm more resilient. Particularly in the context of climate change, resilience will become increasingly more important, because resilient systems are able to withstand more severe weather which farmers around the world are already experiencing.

One quality of resilience is redundancy which is often contrary to short-term economic gain. In terms of farming redundancy means to introduce elements into the system that serve no immediate purpose.