



BY MARTYN FISHER

Wednesday 29th April 2015, 10:15 London



## ***Interview: Taking organics to the next level***



**Where do organics fit into a marketplace in the midst of a race to the bottom ?**

**Martyn Fisher meets a man whose frightening wake-up call has led him to fight to boost organics presence**

### RELATED ARTICLES



**R**ichard Branson said his Virgin business empire was born out of a sense of frustration. Fred DeLuca, meanwhile, started the Subway foodservice chain in order to pay his way through medical school. Adam Wakeley, the driving force behind the UK's leading solely organic-focused fruit grower and supplier, can probably lay claim to trumping both of those famous business tycoons with the story as to how he got started at Ethical Fruit Company.

Wakeley's name will be familiar to those involved in the top-fruit business, as his family ran Wakeley Brothers in Sittingbourne, Kent, a firm that was hit by a major fire in 1997. But Wakeley's move into organic was sparked a few years prior to that owing to another dramatic incident. He tells FPJ: "My son was born with complications after my pregnant wife was caught in a chemical spray on the farm. He needed more than two years of hospital treatment. It was a real wake-up call." Wakeley left Kent

behind to move to Warwickshire, joining Organic Farm Foods at its office in Lampeter, south-west Wales, in 1997.

The company endured a tough period after losing a contract with its biggest customer, Waitrose, in 2002. Wakeley had already left Organic Farm Foods at that point, before being encouraged to return in 2005 by the business' new owners.

A transformation was enacted, as the new owners and key players like Wakeley moved away from the vegetable and salad side of the business to focus more on organic fruit production and supply. Its first organic fruit farm was established in Gloucestershire in 2007, and efforts were made to strengthen the business' global supply chain. That side of the business then took on its own identity as part of the group, becoming Ethical Fruit Company.

It has since gone from strength to strength, taking the 2008 financial crash and its repercussions (consumers by and large sacrificing luxury items, such as organic groceries) in its stride to grow into the circa-£20 million, supermarket-supplying company that it is today.

Its major products today are top fruit, grapes, melons, kiwifruit, mangoes, and blueberries, although Wakeley – the MD – says the business is looking at expanding into more organic exotic fruits.

He remains as bullish as the day he moved across the UK to switch his food production focus, and says: “We want to become the number-one stop for organic fruit solutions for retailers, with the exception of bananas.

“We are fully engaged with the organic industry. I was one of the original founders of the Organic Trade Board in 2008, for example, whereas other players in the marketplace are conventional companies who just do some organics on the side. Being involved in the bigger picture means we have the insight first-hand to influence retailers.”

There's no getting away from the fact that Ethical Fruit Company is still a small fish in a very big fresh produce pond, given the fact that total organic food and drink sales account for just under two per cent of the grocery market. Wakeley says: “Organic fruit is the second key entry point to the market, which is positive, but the biggest challenge to growing the market is availability.

“We started our organic fruit farm in the UK in 2007, doing apples for Tesco, and that has given us that availability on the ground here in this country. Organic grapes have been our next biggest challenge, and I think we're pretty much the only organic grape importer in the UK. It's all about having the right varieties to plant, to get the most from the container coming over, and we work closely with grape breeders to get the best varieties to growers to boost availability.

“There are still new varieties we need to play around with to get right, as well as the likes of Flame, Crimson and Sugraone, but we're working towards getting better availability of good-quality product, and to extending the season.”

The \$64,000 question at present is where organics fit into a grocery retail market engaged in a race to the bottom. Wakeley says the UK's big supermarket chains are in “panic mode”, and believes that too many of them have “overlooked intelligent marketing”, as well as the fact that research by organic lobbying bodies has shown that, on average, organic consumers tend to spend more money on their shopping trips.

Wakeley notes: “Organic veg and salads have just not got the focus. They're lumped in with conventional products. From a fruit point of view, the decline of sales and range in Tesco has stopped, and it, like Sainsbury's, is on an incline. We've pushed and pushed with the buyers. But we need to provide evidence and data to retailers to increase the range and investment in organic produce on shelves.

“If retailers were prepared to work on a lower margin, organic sales would increase, and footfall would increase, and research has shown they would be the kind of people who spend the most money. The opportunity is there, they just need to go out and achieve it.”

There are, of course, certain retailers who are prepared to work on a far lower margin to get organic produce on their shelves. Wakeley says: “We’ve seen a cautious entry into organics from the discounters, and welcome it, although they’re doing the products as loss-leaders, and it undervalues the value of organic at other retailers.

“But the shopping habits in the UK are sophisticated. Tesco and Sainsbury’s organic shoppers won’t move to Aldi or Lidl, they’ll go to organic specialists like Riverford and Abel & Cole.”

Despite being entangled in the often punishing world of fruit and vegetable supply, Ethical Fruit Company has stayed true to its roots. It is independently audited annually using an ethical checklist, something that Wakeley – who is also a trustee at Pesticide Action Network UK – believes is unique for a company in the fresh produce industry.

And it’s this commitment to ethics that recently saw the firm selected by the London Stock Exchange as one of the most inspirational companies operating in the UK today.

The only way is ethics, it would appear.