

# fresh perspectives

## Made in Vietnam: pride or prejudice?

Vietnamese consumers have a passion for brands and a pride in local produce, factors that can be exploited by the country's increasingly professional fruit sector



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**Riding on my motorbike through the streets of Hanoi, it's always a joy to behold how much Vietnamese people love brands: the bigger the better, and no matter whether they're fake and misspelled or real and expensive, brands leap out from chests and backs, phones and bags. The Western lifestyle is an aspiration here, and over the past few years I have seen Vietnam transform itself into the 'Fast Brand Nation' with the assumption that the best is coming from the West. But is that always true? And does it also apply in the case of fresh produce? Not necessarily so.**

In Hanoi it is hard to ignore the billboards exclaiming 'Made in Vietnam', proudly indicating Hanoi's best selling retail chain for export quality textiles.

International research has indicated that a 'Made in...' label has a substantial impact on quality perceptions and plays an important role in purchasing decisions. 'Made in' the West is generally perceived as being of better quality than 'Made in' South East Asia. But how does that generally expected negative origin image explain the success of a chain called 'Made in Vietnam'?

This apparent contradiction led me to look closer at country of origin perception when working with fresh fruit brands. I looked at my own bowl of fruits at home and had to admit that I prefer the fruits to originate from Vietnam. Living for several years in Vietnam I have become as influenced as any other Vietnamese consumer with regard to food safety scares related to the big northern neighbour. Whether true or false, like the average Vietnamese consumer, I do perceive Vietnamese fruits to be more 'safe' than those from China and do have a tendency to distrust labels that declare the fruits are from Australia, the US and other popular import countries, as labels are easy to fake.

Everyday, vast quantities of fruit cross the Vietnam-China border gates. Most of these fruits do not go through any food hygiene examination and regular food safety scandals have left deep marks of distrust on imported fruits. Whether true or false, this prejudice helps to explain the positive image of Vietnam as country of origin. In a sign of how deep this preference for domestic produce goes, a recent in-store sales campaign promoting Vietnamese fresh produce generated a sales increase of more than 50 per cent.

But to attribute the preference for Vietnam as country of origin only to this prejudice would be to do a disservice to the Vietnamese character. The Vietnamese people are proud of their history, their country and their products. The Vietnam fruit sector is steadily 'professionalising', not only for export but also in serving the more demanding domestic market. In the fresh produce sector, brands and labels are mushrooming and emphasising their 'home turf'. With their self-esteem boosted by lower quality imports from China, Vietnamese consumers place a high value on their own produce. When we, Fresh Studio Innovations Asia, introduced a local branded fruit product on the Vietnamese market two years ago we received comments like: "It makes me very proud this fruit is from Vietnam". The sales have soared since then.

In marketing international fruits to the 88m population of Vietnam, don't expect easy gains. Although the market is far from saturated, the competition from domestic fruits is growing



**In-store promotions for local produce have scored success**

on a daily basis. Not only are Vietnamese consumers very conscious of quality, distrustful of imports and proud of home-grown produce; the Vietnamese fruit sector increasingly applies modern marketing strategies and identifies and exploits its strengths. It is through both pride and prejudice that domestic fruits can build their brand value on country-of-origin. Grown in Vietnam: pride and prejudice!



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