

PRODUCE MAN WITH MIDAS TOUCH

BY SHEILA ROONEY

Credit is due to the man who is giving cauliflower sex appeal. He is Bob Nunes, one of the movers and shakers in the Salinas Valley produce industry, whose brow-raising tactics for promoting everyday vegetables and fruit have earned him the reputation as a pioneer among industry members.

"I guess you could say I'm a fish that likes to swim upstream," observes Nunes, president of the Salinas-based Nunes Company, one of the country's largest produce marketing operations. "I like the excitement of taking risks that others don't always think make sense."

Like snagging glamorous actress Brooke Shields to tout his "Foxy" brand of cauliflower and lettuce in a series of East Coast television commercials and billboards. (Californians may not be as familiar with the Foxy brand, because 50 percent of the company's produce is sold in heavily populated cities on the East Coast.)

The idea just came to him one morning, says Nunes, who says he likes "to be imaginative." "Good nutrition leads to good health, which in turn makes you look and feel great. We thought Brooke's wholesome, healthy image was a great match for our product. She agreed," says Nunes.

By linking his products with Shields, he says, consumer recognition of the Foxy brand skyrocketed in Northeastern cities, and sales volume was boosted by as much as 25 percent.

Nunes, a Salinas Valley native, has farming in his blood. His father, Tom Nunes Sr., immigrated from the Azores to take up farming in the



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valley in the 1930s. Bob and his brother, Tom, worked the ranches while growing up. Later both brothers studied economics at Stanford University.

Returning to the valley after graduation, Bob spent the next six years learning the business side of the

produce industry. In the meantime, Tom, with several partners, founded Growers Exchange, Inc. a grower/shipper of lettuce. In 1959, Bob joined the company and over the next seven years, helped it become one of the West's leading grower/shippers of lettuce.

The brothers struck off on their own in 1966 to form Nunes Brothers of California, growing and shipping lettuce, cauliflower, celery and cantaloupe from the Salinas and Imperial valleys, and later from Arizona.

In the first year, Bob Nunes began displaying the progressive marketing that has won the admiration of his peers. He offered consumers an incentive with the purchase of a head of lettuce—a discount on the price of a popular seasoning salt, a tactic unheard of in the produce business. He also was among the first to experiment with prepackaged produce by introducing

film-wrapped lettuce.

That company was eventually sold, and after a few years of early retirement, Bob and his brother teamed up again for yet another venture. With Bob as salesman and Tom as grower, they founded the Nunes Company, beginning operation with 800 crop acres.

Today this grower/shipper is one of the nation's larger produce marketing organizations, responsible for more than 14,000 acres of lettuce, cauliflower, asparagus and celery.

Nunes attributes this tremendous growth to his brother's good farming, a quality product and effective marketing and promotional

efforts, like the campaign using Brooke Shields, designed to increase recognition of the Foxy brand and to associate it with top quality.

Despite all his success, Nunes has a reputation as an unpretentious man who is extremely generous to local organizations and charities.

"He is one of the most astute, professional individuals in the agriculture industry," says longtime friend Arnold Papazian, a produce broker in Salinas. "He is very humble. Bob never toots his own horn. You never hear him take credit for anything, but he's one of our community's driving forces." ♦

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