

"We have a fully written and implemented HACCP plan for our produce," the company president asserts. "Produce is treated a little differently than anything else. Being a USDA facility has been very good for us. You learn a lot of lessons in that side of life that transfer over into the produce side of life.

"Any time we can let the consumer and our buyers know what kind of a plant we are, we're very proud to tell them. We want them to know that food safety is number one with us. We do a lot of different things for not only the USDA side but for the produce side. A lot of times when people come through our plant, they're quite surprised at the steps we've taken to make sure our plant is extremely clean. One of the compliments we often get when we give a tour is, 'Man, this is clean.' That's very important to us."

Along with the proprietary packaging system Reichel has developed for his produce snacks, the cleanliness of his plant certainly plays a role in the surprising shelf life he routinely gets with his products. Apple snacks are good for up to 42 days, while he can stamp snacks containing cut-and-peeled carrots with a whopping shelf life of up to 50 days.

Enviably Shelf Life

"We feel our shelf life is a tremendous advantage," Reichel says. "In fact, one of our competitors contacted us and wanted to know if we would co-pack for them. They had a number of reasons and one of them was the shelf life. The individual that contacted me said, 'I bought your product off the shelf and it happened to be out of code, but it was absolutely wonderful.'

"We've made the product not only for the consumer when they get it home but also for our customer, the retailer. It's made it easier for them to sell our product. Everybody looks at "turns" on their product and how much code is left when it's sitting on the shelf, but the consumer doesn't want to buy the produce and know that he's only got a day or two left.

"I know quite often some produce is extremely delicate. It's nobody's fault. It's just the nature of the beast. But one of the things we've strived for is not only to make sure that the retailer can get it off the shelf but, also, that the consumer can take a week's worth of it home for school lunches. Maybe Mom or Dad goes shopping once a week and their child wants one of these in his lunch box at school every day. So they are going to buy five of them."

"I guess part of our goal is that we want to have the very best product out there, period. Secondly, we don't want to be just a regional player. We want to ship nationally and have more than enough shelf life to get it into the marketplace and have some marketable time on the product. As far as the quality of the product, I can say that our same store sales from year to year with some of the retailers have continued to grow in double digit figures. So, we're proud of that.

"We've worked hard on the price point, too. The product inside has to be number one but we want the consumer to feel like they've received a great value for what they paid." ■