



Abel and Cole

This case study focuses on a vegetable box scheme that brings together a number of suppliers and operates across virtually the whole of England. It highlights the importance of strict quality standards when dealing with a number of producers, and explores the increasing significance of online marketing as a sales tool.

Background / Overview

Established in 1988 with a head office in Wimbledon, London, Abel and Cole operates a fruit and vegetable box scheme that delivers to customers throughout England from its main depot in Andover and other strategically-located distribution hubs. The company aims “to celebrate seasonal fruit and vegetables, inspire chefs and try to bring customers closer to the people who make and grow their food”. It sells direct to the consumer and doesn’t supply any wholesale outlets or retailers.

In the main, customer orders are placed online through a central website, although there is facility for email and telephone ordering. Boxes are delivered on set days to certain areas to maximise efficiency and reduce food miles, with a 99p charge added to all orders to cover delivery costs. The scheme offers great flexibility for customers, who for instance, can choose weekly, fortnightly, or monthly deliveries, or even set up a regular order which they can top up with additional items as and when required – this system has proven very effective in encouraging repeat business.

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Unless specified, the vegetable boxes usually contain potatoes, carrots and onions every week, plus a range of seasonal options; the salads boxes/bags usually contain lettuce leaves, tomatoes and cucumbers. Abel and Cole monitors which varieties customers prefer, and can provide suggestions to producers as to what to grow. Where possible, Abel and Cole source seasonal produce from British organic farmers and growers, with supplies supplemented by imported produce, particularly citrus and tropical fruits. The proportion of home-grown to imported produce varies according to the time of year, but can be as low as 50% and as high as 80% in late summer. Abel and Cole does not give full details of where each item comes from because it often purchases small volumes from several suppliers or deals with a number of different growers due to variations in weather conditions, crop problems, or occasionally through spikes in demand.

All growers and suppliers organise their own deliveries to the company's central depot in Andover, where all produce is packed. Prices paid to suppliers include the cost of delivery, a policy that is the same for both UK and overseas suppliers. Abel and Cole tends to source directly from overseas suppliers with the exception of Holland, where it has a long-standing relationship with the Biostee Hoessksche Waard Cooperative in Rotterdam.

In addition to its Wimbledon headquarters and main packing site in Andover, Abel and Cole operates distribution hubs at Stanstead, Maidstone, Tamworth, Warrington, and Sharpness in Gloucestershire, which opened in January 2011 with the aim of extending delivery along the Welsh M4 corridor.



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Delivery is possible to approximately 80% of England plus along the Welsh M4 corridor. The furthest west for delivery is Somerset, and the firm does not deliver further afield into Wales or Scotland.

The distribution system includes a cool chain and there are refrigeration facilities at all hubs. At the main depot at Andover, produce is delivered and packed Sunday to Thursday, before being distributed to the other depots the next day via a haulier using boxed pallets. Abel and Cole has a fleet of 100 vans and its staff average 70-80 drop-offs a day.

To maintain quality, produce supplied to Abel and Cole must meet three specific standards:

- All produce must be a minimum of Class II under EU fruit and vegetable grading standards i.e. “reasonable quality produce which may show one or more defects”
- All produce supplied as organic must originate from growers or importers that are registered with an approved organic certification body, such as the Soil Association
- Each supplier has a specific Abel and Cole product specification included as part of their contract. All produce is checked against this specification, firstly by an initial visual check, followed by an additional quality control inspection prior to any delivery being accepted. As a rough guide, the company accepts stock with up to 5% defects. Any consignments with more than 10% of defected produce are automatically rejected and substituted with stock from an alternative supplier.

The company’s pricing system is based on production costs plus transport costs (where appropriate) plus a margin. For most core products, the price given by Abel and Cole does not usually change during the year. Variations can occur if a grower’s costs increase due to unforeseen circumstances which might lead to them wishing to negotiate a higher price.

On the other hand, when suppliers have a glut of produce that they are keen to find an outlet for, prices may too be renegotiated. Box prices to customers are reviewed annually, with Abel and Cole regularly monitoring supermarket prices to ensure it has a good feel for the market.

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Abel and Cole has placed a great emphasis on its online presence to promote the business. The company website, plus Facebook and Twitter feeds, are frequently updated, while the company also sends regular newsletters (electronic and hard copy) to its customer database. The firm has also enjoyed significant success by being very interactive with customers, for example, by staging regular competitions and open days to encourage participation and brand loyalty.

Where possible, the firm aims to use as little packaging as possible without compromising the quality of the produce. Therefore, all packaging is collected from the customer for re-use, while re-usable or recyclable crates are used where possible. Chilled food is delivered in polystyrene boxes with re-usable frozen gel ice packs, while the company also experimented using recyclable cardboard boxes complete with 'wool cool' insulation – 100% British wool sealed by recyclable food grade polyethylene wrap, a process which can keep contents below 5°C for up to 24 hours.



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Lessons To Be Learned

Product Choice

The first priority for Abel and Cole is that the produce it supplies is quality produce that must meet strict standards – it must be at least Class II under EU fruit and vegetable grading standards; it must be grown to specific organic standards; and it must pass the company's own rigorous internal inspections.

Abel and Cole has a clear policy to source seasonal produce from British organic farmers and growers as much as they possibly can, and to only supplement this with imported produce to fill in the gaps between UK harvests.

By monitoring with customers as to which varieties they prefer, the company is able to advise its suppliers on what to grow. The seasonal nature of the business – apart from 'year-round' staples such as potatoes – also ensures that customers are provided with a continually diverse range of products.

Supply Chain Issues

The Abel and Cole network covers most of England and the M4 corridor into Wales. Produce is initially transported by the suppliers to a central depot and pack-house, then transferred onto various distribution hubs (and subsequently customer drop-off points) by the company's own vehicles.

Abel and Cole prefers to deal with multiple suppliers for each product in order to spread risk should one supplier fall into difficulties and fail to deliver. However, for some of the minor products such as dates, this is not always possible. On a similar theme, a broad geographical spread of growers is ideal to mitigate any localised or regionalised adverse weather conditions.

From the supplier's perspective, Abel and Cole actively discourages growers from producing exclusively for the veg box scheme in order to spread their own business risk and not become overly reliant on a single buyer.

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Costs And Value-Added Within The Supply Chain

Produce is maintained in good condition through cool-chain transportation and cool storage facilities, which are obviously an additional but necessary expense.

The company practices an ethos of being environmentally responsible and encourages its customers to do likewise by promoting recycling, re-use, and co-ordinating deliveries where possible to reduce food miles.

With its focus on seasonality and British grown produce, Abel and Cole places great importance on educating its customer base on the benefits of home-grown fruits, vegetables, and salads, helping growers increase sales of some of the lesser-known items of fresh produce.

Supply Chain Improvement In Wales

Abel and Cole's hub at Sharpness in Gloucestershire was opened with the main aim of extending delivery along the Welsh M4 corridor. Any extension of the Abel and Cole scheme further into Wales could compete with indigenous box schemes already in operation. These tend to concentrate on the Cardiff area, where signs of competition for customers have been evident for some time.

Low population densities in much of Wales mean that box schemes are more expensive to operate, with the most successful box schemes tending to be operated by companies who also utilise other complementary outlets such as farm shops, retailers, and farmers' markets.



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