



DELIVERING CUSTOMER VALUE IN FRESH FRUIT AND VEG

A guide to setting & maintaining quality specifications



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About WRAP

WRAP is not-for-profit, working with governments, businesses and citizens to create a world in which we use resources sustainably. Our experts generate the evidence-based solutions we need to protect the environment, build stronger economies and support more sustainable societies. Our impact spans the entire life-cycle of the food we eat, the clothes we wear and the products we buy, from production to consumption and beyond.

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Setting good specifications is essential to delivering customer value. Using this guide can help you identify what your customers really value and optimise your supply chain to deliver it.

Quality specifications are often too long, include provisions that are out of date or which cause supply chain waste. Updating specifications can boost supply chain efficiency and relationships.

Adopting this best practice can also help your business deliver against voluntary agreements such as [Courtauld 2025](#), [Champions 12.3](#) and the NFU's [Fruit & Veg Pledge](#).

1.0 Define what customers value

Product specifications should reflect accurately what your customers value. If specifications are set too high or include unnecessary parameters, you will increase waste and cost in your supply chain for something that you cannot charge for.

There are a number of things you can do to assess customer value. Consumer taste panels can be used to test specific changes to specifications. Consumer surveys also provide useful insight, as do store visits, monitoring complaints and social media. When specifications are changed, accessing sales data before and after will provide useful context.

If you offer 'wonky' or 'ugly' lines, these offer an excellent opportunity to test consumers' willingness to buy produce that is tasty and nutritious, but less perfect. Using this feedback to update specs for standard lines or to create new value lines is the greatest strength of wonky.

Benchmarking your product against other businesses is common practice, but be aware that benchmarking does not provide insight about your own customers. When setting specifications, relying on benchmarking results too much can make you lose sight of what your customers value.

2.0 Involve your suppliers

To deliver the greatest efficiencies, you should involve your suppliers. Suppliers know which quality parameters cause them the greatest difficulties, and focussing on how these could be changed will identify which parameters to prioritise for consumer testing.

Providing this feedback requires a good level of trust between you and your suppliers and some individuals may find it difficult to be open about this. Identify which member of your team might be best to do this, and who in the supplier's team is more likely to provide you honest feedback.

3.0 What to focus on?

Your suppliers will be best at answering this, but some likely areas are:

- a. **Temporary specifications:** based on feedback from suppliers, the most valued thing that customers can do is issue temporary specifications when seasonal conditions affect quality. You should make it clear that you are willing to consider temporary specifications.

Responding quickly to requests to flex specifications is essential for them to be useful, so in advance you should agree with your supplier who in your team they should ask for flexibility and how, and establish your internal policy and processes for handling requests. For example,

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once agreed you will need colleagues working in quality assurance to work to the new standards, and you may also need to notify store managers.

You should keep track of requests to flex specifications and, where similar requests are made repeatedly, build these into the specification itself.

- b. **Min/max sizes:** small changes to minimum and maximum size criteria can have a big impact on crop utilisation. Relaxing these will help your suppliers improve efficiency and keep costs down. Tightening size requirements should only be considered where there is clear evidence that consumers attach high value to it and after discussing the impact with your suppliers.
- c. **Cosmetic defects:** limits should also be clearly justified by evidence of what consumers value.
- d. **Include images:** using photos in specifications is key to making it clear what is required, they reduce ambiguity and are easily communicated to supplier and buyer teams.
- e. **Wonky/ugly lines:** the value of these lines is in raising the profile of tasty and nutritious, but less perfect produce, although they tend to be costly to supply. If you market 'wonky' lines, you must gather feedback on customers' willingness to buy and use this to update specifications for standard lines, or consider creating new value lines. Any relaxation in specifications must still comply with regulatory requirements for [marketing standards](#).
- f. **Value lines:** if both you and your supplier agree, introducing value lines can deliver improved customer satisfaction, improve crop utilisation and supply chain efficiency.
- g. **Reducing the length of specs:** reducing the length of a quality specification is a clear signal to suppliers to focus on what your customers value most. Long specifications might look like they have everything covered but they cannot be implemented in full. Specifications that are too long require your suppliers to guess where to focus and create confusion, inefficiency and cost.

It is normal for multiple versions of a specification to be created, e.g. so the supplier can provide clear instructions for the packing team, or so the buyer can provide clear instructions for the QC teams. Make sure that you establish with your supplier and your own colleagues how many different versions you have, and establish a clear process for making sure that, when the specification is updated, consistent changes are made to all versions.

- h. **Over-grading:** some suppliers have achieved significant improvements in crop utilisation by packing to specification, rather than over-grading. Buyers have also reported that they want to reduce over-grading that they have seen. The reasons for over-grading can be various – previous experience, over-cautious suppliers, overly eager quality control, etc. You should consider whether your suppliers are over-grading and discuss with your suppliers and depot quality teams the reason for this and what could be done to reduce it.

Solutions to over-grading may include training for supplier and buyer teams, improving working conditions (e.g. lighting) and/or technology (e.g. automated grading, provided these are calibrated regularly). Setting out clear processes and guidance for colleagues in QA to issue warnings for minor defects (e.g. non-progressive skin defects or minor size/shape issues) rather than rejecting loads will help suppliers pack to specification more confidently.

4.0 Good housekeeping

It is good practice to review and update your specifications at least every season.

All aspects of a specification should be justified. This will not be possible from the outset, but every time you update a requirement in the spec, include the reason why a particular level was chosen and date it. This will streamline future reviews and help with continuity during personnel changes.

When you make a change to a specification, you should assess and record any change in sales or consumer feedback. This will tell you whether you got it right and sharing the feedback with your suppliers will help relationship management.

You should also share your experience with your own team. Highlighting your successes and where things have gone less well will gain you credit and help your whole team perform better.

WRAP's vision is a world in which resources are used sustainably.

Our mission is to accelerate the move to a sustainable resource-efficient economy through re-inventing how we design, produce and sell products; re-thinking how we use and consume products; and re-defining what is possible through re-use and recycling.

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