Is the fruit and vegetable sector doing enough to take advantage of growing consumer trends related to veggie trends, as consumers become increasingly interested in experimenting with veggie-inspired diets?

This is the question that European fresh produce organisation Freshfel Europe has asked, as it encourages the industry to tap into consumer trends that could turn out to be opportunities for the sector.

Freshfel presented general fruit and vegetable consumption trends in Europe at Fruit Logistica in Germany, showing that there was a slight increase in the EU average during 2013 and 2014, particularly regarding fruit consumption.

In 2014, the average net consumption in the EU stood at 353g, per person, per day. While this still remains below the minimum recommendation of 400g by the World Health Organisation (WHO), overall Freshfel said it was a positive sign that consumption has increased again slightly, which “hopefully will continue in the future”.

“To continue this positive development, it is crucial that society, as well as the sector, continue to promote fruits and vegetables and further build on the factors that started to improve the consumption trends,” the group noted.

Nevertheless, even though consumption is on the rise, there are some challenges in reaching the consumer, Freshfel outlined.

The sector needs to take a closer look at consumers, particularly given that there is no standard consumer anymore. According to Euromonitor, consumers have become multidimensional, with more room for changing lifestyles, family and society structures as well as individual preference.

Freshfel also pointed out that there also is an increased awareness and attention for non-traditional consumers and personalised consumption, such as gluten-free, fairtrade, organic and vegan. Coincidentally, it also has become much easier for consumers to act on these preferences, as it’s more widely available and not limited to specialised shops.

One segment of consumer differentiation is the veggie-inspired lifestyle. According to studies from several sources, there is a growing trend for flexitarian and vegetarian trends, related to people as well as the food service sector. Veggie restaurants are on the rise, as well as alternatives for meat (plant based spreads, protein meat replacements, etc.).

The focus seems to lie primarily on ‘reduce meat consumption’ or on finding alternatives for meat and less on ‘increase fruit and vegetable consumption’. Therefore, there could be some opportunity for the sector to promote fruit and vegetables, not just as your five-a-day, but as part of alternative diet choices and your meat-free-Monday alternative.

Apart from the veggie trends, Freshfel
pointed to other segments of diversification that can be seen as opportunities by the fresh produce sector, such as organic, which is a niche that it said would continue to be important for consumer diversification. Along with organic, there are elements such as the local and seasonal assortment trends, as well as EU quality labels on protected origin or designation.

"Moreover, fruits and vegetables are great when it comes to their environmental footprint compared to other food products," the group continued. "Fruit and vegetables are at the basis of necessary healthy food and are the best for the environment compared to other foods."

Furthermore, food and health are becoming closer linked, particularly with the rise of personalised medicine and personalised nutrition. This can also lead to more attention and opportunity for specific health qualities of fruits and vegetables.

Freshfel observed that there was growing potential in the foodservice sector in providing more veggie inspired ready-meals or supply more veggie meals in restaurants, while an element that could be utilised more for the promotion of fresh produce is the use of online marketing and social media.

"Being part of the 'online generation' myself, I personally see great potential for online and social media promotion for fresh produce," said Freshfel’s Daphne van Doorn. "Fruits and vegetables are interesting, colourful and fun products, which can be communicated very effectively online."

The consumption of fruit and vegetables is slowly on the rise in EU, so society as well as the sector should build on this momentum," Freshfel added. There is a rising trend for veggie-inspired lifestyles, as well as other consumer diversification segments such as local, seasonal, organic, fair trade, sustainable, healthy nutrition, quality labels, and all these elements could be used to effectively communicate to consumers (online as well as offline) by emphasising the great assets of fresh fruits and vegetables – namely that they are colourful, positive and sustainable, fresh, fun and versatile.