The WVU study team wanted to see if a sales display could change that preference. The researchers also wanted to see how the West Virginia apples fared in taste tests when the origin of the apples was not revealed.

For the promotions experiment, russeted Golden Delicious apples grown in West Virginia were displayed next to smooth Golden Delicious apples obtained from the Pacific Northwest. The price was the same for both kinds.

Four types of treatment were tested in four randomly assigned days. In one treatment, both types of apples bore the same generic label. In another treatment, the West Virginia apples were identified as such with a sign and stickers. The third treatment used a display urging shoppers to “Taste a Real Apple,” emphasizing flavor over color perfection for the russeted apples. The fourth treatment combined the two promotional strategies of taste and state pride.

“Whenever the ‘Real Apple’ poster was displayed, the russeted apples out-sold the smooth ones,” Baugher says. “With...
out the poster, the russeted apples sale averaged 47 percent of the total; with the poster, that average increased to 62 percent.

The study found insufficient evidence to indicate that the appeal to state pride boosted sales. Taste appeared to be the critical factor.

The taste test pitted the West Virginia-grown Golden Delicious against the same variety of apple grown in the state of Washington. The judges—150 customers at a Morgantown supermarket—tasted unlabeled slices of both apples and ranked them for texture, sweetness, juiciness and taste.

“The consumers ranked the West Virginia apples higher than the Washington apples on all four characteristics,” Cheves reports. “On a scale of one to five, the average overall rating of the West Virginia apples was 4.1, compared to 3.5 for the Washington apples.”

The lowest, average rankings were given to the sweetness and taste of the Washington apples, while the highest ranking was given to the taste of the West Virginia apples.

The taste test results suggested another promotion possibility: letting customers try before they buy.

“It appears that customers might respond positively to samples of high-quality West Virginia apples,” Cheves observes. “Results of the display experiments also suggest that consumers respond favorably to the idea that an apple with an imperfect appearance may taste better than one that is more appealing cosmetically.”

Morgantown, W. Va.—