

The Next Step for yourfarms.com- A Local Marketing Cooperative Promoting Local Foods and Local Farms

Final Report for FNC06-613

Project Type: Farmer/Rancher

Funds awarded in 2006: \$18,000.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2009

Region: North Central

State: Ohio

Project Coordinator:

[Bill Harra](#)

Project Information

Summary:

PROJECT BACKGROUND

- Yourfarms.com is in the business of promoting locally grown agricultural products as a service to farmer members.
- There are sixteen active members of the group, one group dropped out due to lack of producing agricultural products.
- Yourfarms.com is a web-based market showcasing farmer members. It is available to customers to find farms 24/7/365 and can be easily updated as products change and more members are added.
- Operations include a board of directors with assistance from Ohio State University (OSU) Extension and various organizations.
- The business is in its sixth year of development.

PREVIOUS SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE EFFORTS

- Prior to receiving this grant, farmers in our community thought of marketing as advertising only. Many relied on small ads in the newspaper which generated little response from customers.
- Our members were interested in internet-based marketing, but lacked the skills and resources to move into this type of marketing. There were some general listings on the internet to help farmers, but these lists were not updated, not easily searchable and did not help attract customers from the local area.
- In our county, there were only four major direct marketing farms with websites. These included: www.stacyfarm.com, www.wittenfarm.com, www.sweetapplefarm.com and www.grimmsgreenacres.com.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Project Objective: (From 2006 Application)

Washington County farmers will collaborate to market their products on the new, farmer-owned website - yourfarms.com. By marketing together as yourfarms.com, local farmers will be able to overcome the challenges of marketing through cooperative efforts. These efforts will allow even small farmers to have connections to marketing experts through the design of the website and the marketing of the website to local consumers.

This branded web presence will be available to all agripreneurs in Washington County who desire to sell locally through joining the cooperative. This will allow for small farms to better market locally grown products, which will in turn:

- Increase net farm income,
- Allow an additional way for the next generation to join current farm businesses,
- Add to the 'quality of life' for urban and suburban neighbors working in other industries and,
- Fill the nutritional/lifestyle wants of local residents who desire to consume locally grown food products.

PROCESS

1. Just before the receipt of this grant, the yourfarms.com group conducted the following:

- a. Started the investigation of forming a formal cooperative with the Ohio Cooperative Development Center.
- b. Completed the design of a basic logo for the group.
- c. This was done to get a head start on developing a brand for the group and trying to make the project happen even if the grant was not received.

2. Upon receipt of the grant, the yourfarms.com group conducted the following:

- a. Soliciting members: The group printed rack cards. These were used to start marketing to farmer members and used at various agricultural meetings around the county (Farm Bureau, Agricultural Education Teachers Young Farmer Meetings, Extension, Soil and Water, etc). The group worked on an Information Sheet which was sent out by OSU Extension and used at these meetings to recruit members. The information sheet included details of this grant, types of farms which could be involved and details of membership.
 - b. Planning the website: The group worked with the Marietta/Washington County Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) Director, Kelly Blazosky, to get someone to develop the site. Our initial contact that was giving us a deal left the area. Thus, we went to the Stonewall Marketing Group for these services. The group met with Stonewall on several occasions.
 - c. Planning general promotions for the website: The group developed a press release for the general public to promote the website once it was live.
3. After the growing season moved into high gear in 2008, the group lost momentum. They decided to work with OSU Extension to hire an intern the next summer to get the website completed with the marketing firm. This ended up to be a real success and made the project get completed.

PEOPLE

Farmer Members

1. Bramble Creek Farms
2. Campbell's Hog Farm
3. Firefly Hollow
4. Gardens in the Works
5. Grimm's Green Acres
6. Harra Covered Bridge Maple Syrup
7. Hope Ridge Farm
8. Lang's Hidden Valley Cattle Co.
9. L.E. Huck & Sons Farm and Greenhouses
10. R&K Wagner Farms
11. Riverboat Alpaca Ranch
12. Rose's Daylily Garden
13. Stacy Family Farm
14. StoneBridge Farm & Apiary
15. Witten Farms

16. Worthington Produce

Public Agencies and Non-Profits

1. OSU Extension, Washington County assisted us in many ways. Extension Educator, Eric Barrett, taught programs at our meetings, promoted us at meeting, hired our intern and offered the support of his staff.
2. Marietta/Washington County Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB). Executive Director Kelly Dyar-Blazosky helped us by sharing information with the tourism community, talking us up at public events, introducing us to Stonewall Marketing and by giving marketing advice.
3. Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at Marietta, Ohio. Director Pamela Lankford assisted us by donating her time to write our business plan.

RESULTS

- The website has been live for two years now.
 - o We have been using Google Analytics (unavailable when the project started) to measure our success on the web.
 - ? In the past twelve months, we have had 551 unique visitors to our website, with Ohio and West Virginia being our top rated states (where we want our local customers to come from!)
 - ? Fifty two unique visitors have come to the website in the last month alone, right at the start of our harvest season.
 - ? We see more potential customers coming from across the river in West Virginia versus our own county and neighboring counties in Ohio. The county across the river always has more views of the website and more pages per view. We did not expect this.
 - ? This has encouraged us to promote our site in that county more than in our own county.
- Seventeen total farms in Washington County paid the \$50 fee and joined the group.
 - o This was much less than we had hoped for, but why didn't more farms join?
 - o Within a year of us getting our grant, the following major internet marketing developments occurred:
 - ? Market Maker came to Ohio;
 - ? Ohio Farm Bureau developed the Our Ohio brand and gave free listings in a searchable format to all of their members;
 - ? Social Media came to the mainstream and was quickly adopted as a free medium for marketing.
 - o The group continued marketing the positive aspects of the website with the information sheets at events. They attended many events, and thus contacted every active farmer in the county either through the mailing or by one-on-one conversation at farmer meetings. Many of the farmers at these meetings stated the free sites were 'good enough for them.'
 - o Thus, we went with what we had and made it work.
- Members have all stated they have received inquiries based on the website. Initially, only 15 out of the 16 active members stated they received inquiries. Finally, Wagners stated a customer arrived on a day they were closed saying the website listed them as open (they forgot to update their hours.) Thus, each of our members has seen increased sales they associate with the website.
- The largest result of the project is our impact on the mentions/discussions of local foods in the community. Local community advocates such as Marilyn Ortt, Marianne Mongahan, Karen Kumpf and more have started to discuss the formation of a local foods council in cooperation with their activities.

DISCUSSION

What we learned as a group:

- Operating a formal cooperative for the group was too big of a task. It takes time and effort that our members were not willing to give as volunteers. Farmers are too busy growing product and managing their own businesses to dedicate the immense amount of time needed. Also, there are too many regulations on cooperatives, too many filing requirements and too much paperwork.
- There are many free marketing opportunities such as Market Maker, the ODA Farm/Farmers Market Listings, Our Ohio and more. Many farmers 'think' this is the way to market their farm. Our members stated these opportunities did not send them customers. But, in general other farmers are using these sites without seeing any results. Most farmers are not measuring the impact of the marketing - and especially their advertising dollars.
- There is a need for a local foods council in our county and there are community leaders who are willing to lead such a group. Our group is going to encourage this along to take over our yourfarms.com project. We constantly hear about how great the project is and how people expect to use it to find locally grown products. But, farmers in our county are not willing to pay the \$50 to join, citing free marketing sites. A local foods council could operate the site for free and increase membership through this free offering, now that the site is created.

What we learned as individual farmers:

- Marketing is more than advertising. During our meetings, our work with OSU Extension Educator, Eric Barrett improved our skills in:
 - o Writing press releases
 - o Understanding of logos and the need for them (11 of our 16 members have developed a logo as a result of participating in the project.)
 - o Communicating the importance of agriculture to our local community.

PROJECT IMPACTS

1. There were two major economic impacts of this grant:

a. First, members of this group improved the marketing of their own farms. The group worked as a team, visiting with the marketing company, learned to write press releases, received training in branding and more.

b. Three daylily farms in the county were brand new at the start of this project.

When they joined, they did not know each other existed. Instead of thinking they were all competitors, the group (Firefly Hollow, Gardens in the Works, and Rose's Daylily Garden) joined forces to sponsor a summer drive-it-yourself daylily tour for the county. This tour has grown from one weekend a year to a three-weekend per year event in July of each year. The group has all seen increased sales due to this event and by adopting the concept of marketing together.

2. The environmental impacts of this grant are yet to be seen. Once the local foods council is officially formed, we feel more of the new start up farms will join and also be able to increase their net farm sales in the local community as a result of the listing and information on the site.

3. The social impacts of this grant will continue for a long time. The website has had positive results through our analysis of Google Analytics attached to the site. We are seeing more and more unique visitors, especially during the growing season. We will continue to market the site through our rack cards, press releases and word of mouth.

OUTREACH

1. Outreach for our project:

a. The receipt of the grant was announced in a press release. Details were in the Marietta Times newspaper and on WTAP-TV and their website, reaching thousands of people in Ohio and West Virginia.

b. The receipt of the grant was promoted through OSU Extension in their hard copy newsletter to around 800 farmers and around 500 farmers/community leaders in

their weekly email newsletter.

c. Details were included in the email newsletter of our local Chamber of Commerce, distributed to over 700 local business owners.

2. Outreach for our project events/activities:

a. We participated in the Agricultural Opportunities Conference the past five years, distributing rack cards to interested participants.

b. Our members solicited memberships throughout the county at agricultural meetings. We estimate we reached 80 percent of the 1,000 farmers in the county at these meetings.

3. Outreach for our project results:

a. Our website has had over 800 unique visitors since we started using Google Analytics.

b. We have shared our results with OSU Extension's Direct Marketing Team through our Extension Educator as an example of a locally focused marketing opportunity.

Research

Participation Summary

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture or SARE.



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