

Bulletin 1161, Communicating with Markets: A Producer's Guide

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Communicating with Markets: A Producer's Guide

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This publication is for farmers and food producers who are interested in selling food or value-added products directly to consumers or through a distributor. Whether you are engaged in direct marketing or selling through a distributor, clear, consistent communication is key to maintaining good relationships with your buyers and repeat sales.



- **Clear**

What products do you have? What is the sales quantity, price and delivery date?
What type of packaging is used? How are orders submitted?

- **Consistent**

Set a goal of scheduling your market communication for the same time each week. Be sure to include all relevant information and note any changes to your delivery schedule or availability.

- Share the story of your farm in 1-2 sentences. Share successes, insights and happenings – not challenges or disasters. Include updates about crops or product availability in the next 2-3 weeks. Solicit ideas for new products to be developed.
- Invite people to come to your farm or production facility!

- **Build Relationships**

Asking for feedback on what works, what customers love about your product, what they might change. Be ready to incorporate this feedback and monitor the impact.

- **Set Expectations**

How can you be reached? How quickly will you respond? When do orders need to be placed? Let your accounts/customers know if/when the delivery schedule you set might change (ie: taking a vacation, etc.)

Below are some tips specific to each market channel through Direct-to-Consumer and Business to Business approaches.

“Inviting buyers to your farm is is super important and helpful. When people can see what you are doing, they are much more excited about purchasing from you and/or selling your product.”

— Sarah Wiederkehr, Winter Hill Farm

Direct-to-Consumer

Outlets might include: Farmers’ Markets, CSAs, Roadside Stands, or U-Pick operations

Verbal Communication

- **Greet customers**

- Customers are coming to meet YOU. Your ability to welcome them and set the tone for their interaction is critical. A simple “Hello,” “Can I help you?” or similar phrase can break the ice and invite conversation.
- For repeat customers, make sure to somehow let them know that you recognize and appreciate them. Try to remember names and faces!
- **Explain your offerings – pricing, varieties, uses, recipe suggestions**
 - Often people will have a variety of questions. Being able to help them by answering these questions and providing other resources will make for successful interaction.
 - Signage can answer frequently asked questions, which can be helpful during a ‘rush’ at a farmer’s market.
- **Ask Questions**

Express your interest in your customers by asking them questions, “Can I help you find anything particular?” “How are you planning to prepare this?” “How many people are you serving?”
- **Active Listening**

Encourage sharing by asking open-ended questions.

Non-Verbal Communication

- **Body Language**
 - Are you standing up? Sitting down? Are your arms folded? Are you looking at your phone? All of these postures indicate your attitude toward your customers. Standing up straight and ready behind your display can be an effective way to indicate that you’re ready for business.
 - Eye contact is important in letting customers know that you see them.
 - Smiling or otherwise conveying that you are happy to be there, and are interested in interacting.
- **Professional Dress**

Your choice of clothing will convey a sense of the experience customers will receive at your farm.
- **Signage**
 - Keep it simple and attractive
 - Be sure it is clean, clear and concise.
 - Many people won’t even stop in their scan of a market unless they know what you’re selling. Be sure to create signage that supports your sales pitch and reinforces your offers to help customers and draw them to you.
 - Include photos of your farm.
- **Accessibility & Layout**
 - Look at your market display or farm stand. Is there adequate room to move through the space? Consider customers with wheelchairs and strollers- can they access your products? Is it clear where customers line up for check out? If you are offering samples is the signage clear about ingredients? Is a trash can nearby? Is there room for a customer to write a check or put down their bags?

- Also consider the flow when multiple people are at the stand.
- Clean, tidy, organized, good looking displays sell product!
- If offering samples, make sure you are constantly cleaning up and replenishing the samples. Empty the trash regularly.

Written Communication

Website

- Your website is an expression of your farm and values. It can express your love for your lifestyle and tell customers what they might expect in future interactions.
- Consider the tone of your writing. Keep it upbeat and active.
- Choose colors and photos that support your values. Consider seasonal photos that indicate you update your web presence often.
- Be sure to include the following information:
 - Who you are
 - Why you farm
 - Where you farm & where customers can find you
 - Your hours of operation
 - How to reach you
 - How you farm (i.e. your philosophy and/or product methods)
- **Feedback**
 - Feedback from your customers is critical- especially negative feedback! Make sure there is always a way for customers to (anonymously) tell you what they think.
 - Comment cards at your market, and/or a link to a form on your website are easy to arrange and provide you with information about how to improve.
 - Asking how customers used a product can also help how you sell that product to others.
- **Brochures, Rack Cards or other Literature**
 - Include a “snapshot” of your farm and that has a similar look and feel to your website. Your branding should be consistent.
 - For Community Supported Agriculture (or CSA) farms there may be additional “touch points” that will help to clarify the relationship you’d like to cultivate with your customer.
 - Your CSA brochure should communicate the benefits of your program.
 - It should include start date and end date for shares.
 - Indicate price and deadline for payment.
 - Be sure to state when & where shares can be picked up.
 - If you offer “add-on” shares, clearly explain the cost, duration and specifics pertaining to pick-up.
 - Consider writing a series of emails just for new members that offer them reasons to get excited for the share once they sign up.
 - A CSA Newsletter can help new members understand how to use their share, invite feedback, or introduce members to new products. Your

choice of content can support the ideal relationship you would like to build with your shareholders.

- **Highlighting Your Certifications**

- If you have chosen to certify your farm or products in any way, be sure to use those logos or language consistently across your written marketing. Examples include:
 - Certified Organic
 - Certified Humane
 - Certified Naturally Grown
 - Animal Welfare Approved
- Your certifications are likely a big selling point, so be sure to include them on any printed media, on websites, Facebook, etc.

“In order to find success in this market channel you will need to have genuine enthusiasm for meeting with and talking to a wide range of people about your farm and products.”

Business to Business

Outlets might include: Natural Foods and Grocery Stores, Wholesalers, Restaurants, other Farms, or CSAs. In order to find success in these market channels you will need a good idea of your base cost of production to set a realistic price, how your products can benefit the sales outlet you are marketing to, and to be willing to understand the needs of your outlets. Many of the tips from above will apply as you get to know the individuals at each of the businesses.

Once your production plan is ready for the year, begin a relationship by calling or stopping by to set-up an appointment. Ask for the buyer for the department your product matches or ask to speak with the chef, buyer or owner.

It is vital to be able to explain your prices so that a buyer is more likely to pay what you need and can explain it to the end customer. Explain why your product is a good fit for their outlet. It may be because you've eaten at their restaurant and know some of the menu items or because their business has a mission that is akin to yours.

Once you have a meeting time established be sure to bring the following materials:

- Crop Plan or Product List (with notes about seasonal availability)
- Price List
- Samples and/or Farm Photos
- A history of your production volume to illustrate your ability to deliver

Be sure to indicate what volume of each product you plan to provide this year and when that volume will be available. Let them know what is the best way to reach you with questions.

Inquire about the following:

- What are your packaging & labeling requirements?
- Do you require washing?
- Is there a standard pack or unit?
- Are there grade requirements?
- What quantities do they want?
- How often are these quantities needed?
- Do they have set delivery days?
- What is the best way to communicate about product availability?
- How much lead time do they need to order seasonal products?
- How will they submit orders?
- How about requirements for GAP (Good Agricultural Practices)?
- How about for UPC or PLU codes?
- How much liability coverage do they need you to carry?
- Do they want paper invoices or emails?
- Who should you give the invoices to?
- What is their payment schedule?
- Is it helpful to have photos of your farm, logo or other promotional pieces?
- How will they provide feedback about quality, shelf-life or future orders?

“In order to find success in these market channels you will need a good idea of your base cost of production to set a realistic price, how your products can benefit the sales outlet you are marketing to, and to be willing to understand the needs of your outlets. ”

Additional Resources

There are a variety of resources online to help you enhance your marketing and communication. Two great places to start are:

<https://extension.umaine.edu/business/library/marketing/>

<https://extension.umaine.edu/business/specialty-foods/>

You can also get feedback on your plans by visiting a business counselor at your local Small Business Development Center, found at: www.sba.gov/tools/local-assistance. Your local Extension office can also help, find yours by visiting: <https://extension.umaine.edu/county-offices/>

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