

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

The following are conclusions from a research project conducted by Leslie Pelch, a graduate student in the UVM Department of Community Development and Applied Economics.

# The Consumer Experience of the CSA Partnership

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a form of direct marketing of agricultural products that connects farmers and consumers. Some of the risk of farming is distributed among the consumers and, in return, the consumer gets fresh, local products and a chance to become more connected to a farm and the food system.

Consumers generally pay an up-front fee, allowing the farmer to purchase seed, fertilizer, and equipment and giving him/her a guaranteed salary for the season; the member receives a share of the weekly harvest and may be asked to help with weeding, harvesting, or other chores at some point in the season. The Bio-Dynamic Farming Association maintains a registry of 566 CSAs in the U.S. and Canada.

The following conclusions and recommendations are based on the results of a study of CSA consumers and potential consumers. The research was supported by grants from the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program and the Vermont Agricultural Experiment Station. Data was collected through phone interviews with members, ex-members, and non-members of three CSAs in Vermont during October 1995. Information gathered included how members first found out about the



CSA, why they decided to join, and how satisfied they have been with the experience. All respondents answered questions about their food-shopping habits, demographics, and other aspects of their lifestyles.

### Conclusions

- Word of mouth is the most successful form of advertising.
- Members can be characterized as younger, well-educated people who are more likely to compost and recycle compared to ex-members and non-members.
- Non-members who are more likely to have heard of CSAs tend to have young children, be more likely to compost, and are well-educated, whereas those who were not aware of CSAs were likely to be convenience eaters who saw meal time as an opportunity to save time and energy.

- People who end their memberships tend to do so for reasons related to the types and quantities of produce provided and the inconvenience of the pickup system.
- Income is not a significant determinant of membership status when other variables are held constant, but education level is--people with higher levels of education are more likely to be members.
- Membership status is very sensitive to cost--if the per person cost a potential member faces is high, there is less chance that that person will be a member.
- People who already choose to buy organic produce, and those who feel that political, economic, or social issues are important in their choice of where to shop for food are more likely to be members.
- Members are, for the most part, very satisfied with most aspects of their experience.
- Members may gain satisfaction directly from time spent in picking up their share, but time spent putting away their share does not provide satisfaction.

These conclusions can be used to target potential members depending on what stage a CSA is at in the growth process. A farm trying to increase its membership might use advertising methods to target the type of potential members who are very likely to join. A CSA that has attained a critical mass of members and wishes to diversify its membership might choose to reach out to people who are



less likely to join, or may want to take advantage of advertising methods that reach a wider array of potential members. Most of the following marketing suggestions address both goals.

### Recommendations

- Use word of mouth advertising to the fullest extent possible; reward members who bring in new members; ask members to invite friends to a CSA social/educational event; try to bring the strength of word of mouth to other advertising media--personal statements on posters, have members or core members go to stores, co-ops, events to give face to face information about the experience.
- Focus on young families who live in town and are highly educated when targeting advertising efforts; educate and empower shoppers who don't fit the description of likely members--address their needs and lifestyles.
- Make information about CSA available in places where young professionals work and play; provide information about the food system and CSA to people who might not be likely to seek it out, and explain why they should consider choosing a less convenient option.
- Keep share prices low--even if it means smaller shares.
- Consider delivery or convenient drop off sites, flexibility in what people take home as their share each week, or make

(Continued on page 6.)

*("Where the Rubber Meets the Road to Sustainability," continued from page 2.)*

Our last stop was down "the valley" to the Food Bank Farm in Hadley, Massachusetts. Purchased through a unique combination of funding from state agricultural and environmental protection programs, the town, the food bank, and a local philanthropist, the farm includes housing, barns, and several dozen acres of some of the richest river-bottom soil anywhere. Half of the produce grown goes to the Western Mass. Food Bank--at no charge--and the rest is purchased by the 400 shareholders of the farm's Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. A share costs an average of \$450 and provides enough produce for a family of four from June through October, with additional pick-ups of winter vegetables through Thanksgiving. They also have pick-your-own strawberries, beans, herbs and over 50 varieties of flowers that shareholders can harvest at anytime.

This CSA is certainly the largest in the northeast, perhaps the country, and has an economy of scale that Michael Docter, farm manager, feels is key to its success. Linda Haldebrandt, assistant farm manager, explained that besides growing good food, the farm is trying to educate people by communicating with members about what goes into growing crops locally and organically, and how to use and store various foods.

These farms exemplify just some of the creative and successful pursuits of agricultural niches in New England. The ideas and information generously shared by the farmers were appreciated by the tour participants, who agreed that these farm visits improved their understanding of sustainable agriculture. ☺



*("The Consumer Experience of the CSA Partnership," continued from page 3.)* shares easy to pick up, perhaps pre-packaged, provide lots of fast and easy recipes for fresh produce.

- Emphasize pick up time as a fun time, make it convenient so that members have time to enjoy it, but reduce the amount of time members must spend putting their share away once they bring it home by reducing the amount of processing/separating they have to do.

If you would like a more detailed report that presents the actual results of this study, please contact Leslie Pelch at (802) 656-1018, days. ☺

*("Vermont Pasture Networks Take Root," continued from page 1.)*

believe that the future for a pasture based system of farming in Vermont is bright. According to Murphy, "Vermont has the climate, soils, topography, and precipitation ideally suited to production of high yields of excellent quality permanent pasture grasses and legumes. Vermont farmers could compete against anyone else in the country, if only they would work in harmony with the conditions that they have."

This past winter, a group of farmers and agency representatives (organized by Bryan Petrucci of the American Farmland Trust and Jon Winsten, an independent pasture consultant formerly with PMOP) gathered to discuss the future of grass-based farming in Vermont. The discussions were led by experienced grass farmers. During the process, the group identified key needs of the state's farmers and also looked at how farmers in other parts of the country have worked together to share information about grazing and other sustainable farming methods.

The group's conclusion was resounding support for organizing a farmer-based pasture association. The consensus among the group was that the goal of an association would be to provide assistance to groups and individuals on grazing issues. The members also emphasized that the association should cooperate and collaborate with other private organizations and public agencies in order to ensure that all resources available for the promotion of grazing are used in the most effective, farmer-friendly way possible.

According to John Rutter, a dairy farmer from Bridport, Vermont and one of the participants in the discussions, "There are enough experienced grass farmers out there now to take a leadership role in forming an association. A farmer-run organization could really do a lot to help other farmers learn about and adopt grazing systems. . . which will, in turn, improve their profit margin as well as protect the land and water resources. Our real goal is to keep farmers on the land, even get more farmers on the land, making money and protecting the landscape."

Kate Duesterberg, program coordinator at the center, and Justin Johnson from the Vermont Department of Agriculture, Food & Markets are working with a farmer committee on an organizational meeting for a Vermont Grazier's Association, scheduled for July 18th. The meeting will be in Brookfield, at Dave McDonough's Winter Road Farm from 10:30am until 3pm. Election of officers and approval of the bylaws for the new organization will take place at 1pm. If you would like more information or directions to the meeting, call Kate at (802) 656-0037.

*This article was adapted from "Vermont Graziers Form Association," which appeared in Agriview on June 15, 1996.*

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