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Tips for Marketing in the Local Meats Market Part II, Talking to Customers

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In the last article I profiled three groups of local meats buyers and their buying habits. For farms directly marketing their meats, identifying a target group is the first step in developing marketing materials and your communication with customers. This article outlines how to further develop your marketing message in a focused and deliberate way.

Marketing materials include business cards, brochures, posters, websites, emails, signs and **conversations**. Any marketing materials that you distribute to potential customers should contain a consistent and simple communication with your farm name and contact information, claims, products and prices. Other things to include are: a logo (if you have one), points of differentiation (see below), a few sentences about your farm history or farm philosophy, and a quality photograph. Any photos used should be of high quality (good lighting, high resolution) and should communicate something to the customers' needs and desires as well as accurately reflect your farm. Your materials are always a work in progress, so initially print small numbers of copies so you leave room to make changes and test new ideas.

When communicating with consumers about local meats it is best to operate under a few assumptions. Assume that they are not familiar with livestock production or butchering terminology. Specifically, customers may not be familiar with "hanging" or "hot carcass" weights, typical yields from live, to carcass, to retail pounds of product, terms for feed such as haylage, balage, and silage, as well as terms for livestock such as "gilt" and "feeders". Assume that they are nervous about this buying decision and are generally uninformed, or even misinformed about the production, processing and marketing of meats. However, don't assume that they are stupid! Prepare clear and concise answers to commonly asked questions and consider the customers' needs and desires when answering. When answering a question, consider what information the customer is seeking to make their purchase decision. Save unnecessary details for a longer conversation.

Contrast the following answers to the question: **"How much does a quarter of a beef cost?"**

Answer 1: “I get \$2.65 per pound hanging weight and the butcher gets 47 cents per pound for cut and wrap plus \$35 for the kill fee, but I pay that directly unless you want to but then I’ll have to let you know how much it is”. (An actual answer I was given!)

Answer 2: “A quarter will cost between \$400-450 and weigh about 90-110 lbs.”

One way to begin developing your farm’s marketing plan is to choose one specific target audience based on your current customer base, personal preferences, and the types of consumers available in your area. Keep this group, their preferences, desires, and needs in mind with each decision as you develop your marketing materials. Even if your target audience seems too specific or exaggerated, it is the starting point which will focus your message and ultimately have appeal to a larger audience of potential customers. To begin, write a sentence using the following outline:

Our farm raises *claims/product(s)* for *target customers* who
activity/demographic/behavior.

Think of popular brands and products that you are familiar with, how do they complete this sentence? How would Hershey’s, BMW, and Carhartt write this sentence?

For example, compare these two statements and consider how the marketing would differ:

Farm 1: “Our farm raises pork without antibiotics for mothers with young children who want to save money and eat well.”

Farm 2: “Our farm raises heritage-breed, pastured pork for wine connoisseurs who host gourmet dinner parties.”

Each statement identifies a very specific group of consumers with unique buying habits and preferences which guide the development of marketing materials as well as choices for products, prices, and marketing channels.

Next, find ways to match your product offering to your chosen customers. Tailoring the product line to your customers may include your choices on a cut list, value-added products, packaging choice (butcher paper or cryovac plastic), sales of individual cuts and bundles of cuts, and pricing structure. In the examples outlined above, one farm might choose to sell bundles of assorted frozen cuts wrapped in paper directly from the farm for a flat price while the other might sell fresh or frozen pork by the cut, wrapped in cryovac, at specialty stores and farmers’ markets. Can you identify which is which?

There are increasing numbers of farms entering the growing local meats market necessitating product and farm-brand differentiation. Differentiation means drawing attention to factors that make your farm and products unique. Chances are, your farm brand is already different, you just need to highlight those factors that are attractive to consumers. A combination of the two or three most important points of differentiation should be all that is needed.

Points of Differentiation and Examples for Smart Meat Marketers

- Breed of livestock (heritage, registered, cross)

- Feed and management (farm-grown, rotational grazing)
- Claims and certifications (organic, all natural, humane, dry-aged)
- Points of pride and farm philosophy (treatment of land, animals, community)
- Farm facts and history (years in operation, traditions, other enterprises, farm size)
- Family (cultural heritage, family farm, generations on the farm)
- Product assortment (thick cut steaks, lean ground, value-added, bundles of cuts)
- Superlatives (such as first, biggest, smallest, only)
- Awards (awards you, your farm, livestock or products have won)
- Location (location matters to local foods enthusiasts)

Regardless of your target market, a few details of farm marketing communication are always important. Farm marketing communication should avoid dishonesty and inaccuracy. Brochures, price sheets, websites and conversations should always be honest about the farm, the production methods, the claims, and other details. Marketing is not the craft of misleading people to get them to purchase something; it is the methodology of identifying customers' needs and definition of value, creating a product to satisfy them, and delivering it. In addition, claims should be accurate, for example, "hormone-free beef" is inaccurate, and instead the claim should be "no added hormones".

Other messages to avoid in your communication are "sob stories," complaints and criticisms. Even if you or your farm are experiencing financial or health problems or difficulties with neighbors or government officials, to communicate this to potential customer whether in written materials or conversation is ill-advised. Use your opportunity to communicate with consumers to tell them what you are proud of and what is good about how you farm. Do not tell them what is wrong with what others are doing, whether from the "industry" or other local farms. Rather, focus on the positive details of your farm and products.

In addition, learn to spare your customers from any unpleasant surprises through good communication. Examples of unexpected surprises include packaging type, questions of legality (meat labeled "not for sale" may cause confusion even when legally sold), product weights and yields, and the selection of cuts. Through clear communication about expectations and deliverables, such surprises can be avoided.

In summary, marketing materials such as brochures and price sheets are a great asset for communicating with customers when they contain clear, concise, and consistent information about your farm and products. Planning and designing your materials based on a target market audience helps "brand" your farm. After a target market is chosen you can tailor your products, marketing channels, and communication to best suit them. Points of differentiation make your farm and products stand out and attract your target market. All marketing communicating from your farm should avoid negativity such as dishonesty, inaccuracy, complaints and bashing competitors. On a final note, remember that your materials are always a work in progress. The design and points of your materials can change and grow as you test them in the marketplace.

"Smart Marketing" is a marketing newsletter for extension publication in local newsletters and for placement in local media. It reviews elements critical to successful marketing in the food and agricultural industry. *Please cite or acknowledge when using this material.* Past articles are available at <http://marketingpwt.aem.cornell.edu/publications.html>.