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Using The Internet to Get Customers

Jean Mills

www.ssawg.org

List your Farm for FREE on these websites - do it now!

www.localharvest.org

www.newfarm.org/farmlocator/index.php

www.organicconsumers.org/purelink

Press Release

<http://www.ssawg.org/fresh-pressrelease.html>

Sample Farm websites

www.tuscaloosacsa.com

www.maplespringgardens.com

www.sweetgrassdairy.com

many of the farms in the www.localharvest.org directory have websites

Website Creating Primer

www.allprofitallfree.com

Domain Registration

www.godaddy.com (domain registration and host for Tuscaloosa CSA website)

www.google.com (keywords: domain registration)

Free website hosting

www.google.com (keywords: free website hosting)

<http://www.free-webhosts.com/reviews/>

Electronic Payments Services

www.paypal.com

Search the Internet for any information

www.google.com

More on Internet Marketing

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/tmd/MSB/PDFpubList/InternetMarketing.pdf>



Using The Internet to Get Customers

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I. FREE INTERNET FARM DIRECTORIES

- A. Designed to help consumers find farm products in their area. Usually they are set up so consumers can search by zip code and/or product.
- B. This is good for producers who don't even have a computer. You just get a free listing in these directories that tell people what you offer and how to find you.
- C. Encourage your County Extension Agent and State Ag Department to create a directory.
- D. Help inform consumers about these directories with this press release created by Southern SAWG <http://www.ssawg.org/fresh-pressrelease.html> (insert story about your own farm)

II. FARM WEBSITE (promotional purposes only)

- A. A website can let people get to know you, your farm, and your product. You can get lots of info about your farm out to potential new customers and can show photos to give them a real feel for the farm and you.
- B. Costs roughly \$0 -\$500 to create and \$8- \$100/year for general fees (domain registration and website hosting).
- C. If you decide to barter with or hire someone else to develop your website, check their ability and delivery time.
- D. If you decide to create it yourself, use this www.allprofitallfree.com site for reference.
 - 1. If you don't know anything about building websites, select a website host with free online website building tools and templates. That will greatly reduce the learning curve and will get you technical assistance too.
- E. Before you create, you need to make some determinations that should dictate the look and function of your new website:
 - 1. Decide what you want it to do for you (just tell folks what you offer and where you are? Get them emotionally hooked? Entertain them? Educate them? Sell them something online?).
 - 2. Determine who your audience will be – who your likely customers will be. What customers do you currently have and what customers do you think would be interested in your product if you could reach them?
 - 3. Then decide what message you want to send about you and your business.

4. Study other websites to see how they get their message across and how the sites function. Notice their name, the look, the way the pages are laid out, the things they say, etc.
- F. A poorly designed website is pretty much worthless. Some elements of design to consider:
1. First impression is critical. Make the home page send the message you want and make sure the site provides the info they need in an easy to obtain manner.
 2. Don't get too fancy. Make it real easy to use and very easy to find the information people want. 2 or 3 clicks rule.
 3. Contact info on each page and be sure to reply within 2-3 days. Be careful about providing directions to farm- you may get guests at unwanted times.
 4. PICTURES!
 5. Build trust – testimonials, price comparisons, description of production practices,
 6. Remember you can add at a later time catchy or useful things like a recipe directory or snazzy things like a goat cam where people can watch the goats live.
 7. Have some people try it out before you make it available to the general public.
 8. Keep site updated.
- G. You will need to have a website host or server and a website domain.
1. Website host is the company that magically makes your website available for the world to see. These can be free, but they come with annoying ads all over them and have other limitations. My host is www.godaddy.com and is considered a very good company. I pay \$8/month for hosting.
 2. Website domain is your address, your website name. My website name is tuscaloosaca.com. To use a name, check to make sure no one else already is using the name. Then you have to pay for ownership of that name so no one else can use it also. This usually costs about \$10/year. Your website host will walk you through the domain registration.
 3. Make your name easy for someone to spell, easy to remember and easy to guess if they can't remember the exact address.
- H. Once you get your site built, you have to make sure customers find it.
1. Put your web address on everything – farmer's market sign, business card, in newspaper articles about your farm, letterhead, your newsletters, your organizations newsletters, etc.
 2. Consider sending a postcard to potential customers or putting one in produce bags at market.
 3. Search engines like google and yahoo let you register for free. Plus these search engines are constantly "crawling" the internet to find sites to add to their directories - key words "meta tags" .
 4. Always include location, name and products on your home page so search engines will find you easily.

III. EMAIL DISTRIBUTION LIST

- A. This is simply a list of email addresses that you send information to over the internet.
 - 1. Send group emails to yourself and blind copy the email group. This keeps all the email addresses from appearing on the email you send. People are protective of their email addresses because they don't want to get email from just anyone. If you don't blind copy, you have just given their email address to everyone in the group (an anyone to whom they forward the message). But also this makes it easier for people to print your message or newsletter without having a page of email addresses to print at the beginning.

- B. Collect email addresses by asking current customers if they would like to get email notices from you about what farm products you have available and what specials you are offering. You can also collect email addresses by having people register for a chance at a free bag of produce, chicken, wheel of cheese, etc. (whatever your farm product is). Do this at your farmers market, local health food store, church, school, etc.

- C. You can use this list to simply educate and promote your products or to notify customers what you have to sell and where they can purchase it.
 - 1. This gives you an opportunity to gently motivate people to buy your products. An outright sales pitch probably won't be appreciated (most of us consider this spam). But you can tell them about how the lady beetles have been eating the aphids on your tomatoes and that you always encourage beneficial insects on your farm so you don't have to use nasty chemicals to control pests. You may even email a picture of a beautiful tomato (be careful not to send a big picture file)
 - 2. A regular notice from you prevents people from forgetting that you have delicious, healthy, beautiful products and prevents them from slipping into the habit of getting all their food from the grocery store. They are reminded that by buying from you they are not only helping themselves, but also helping their community by supporting a local farm.

- D. You can also use email to get email orders, with no financial transactions. Customers pay when they pick up the order.

- E. Some use email to take pre-orders for their farmers market.
 - 1. Working families or parents with kids in little league love not having to get to the market first thing to get the pick of the crop. Their pre-order secures their corn for them so they can sleep in or get to the kids' games.
 - 2. This makes people feel special that they get this extra attention. People want to be a part of the exclusive club that gets exactly what they want and it's waiting on them when they get there.
 - 3. You can charge a small fee for this service.
 - 4. The advantage to producer is that this guarantees sales, even if the weather is bad on market day. One farm couple says they have 50% of their farm products sold and bagged before they even arrive at market.
 - 5. Check market rules before you do this. Some market fees are based on sales percentage, and these pre-orders would likely be considered a market sale.

- F. If you are going to not just promote, but actually encourage folks to place email orders, it is absolutely critical to make ordering easy for customers AND you.

1. You can do it real simple by writing an email with the list of what you have, then hand tallying the orders. This is often way too time-consuming for the farmer. Or you can use, to varying degrees, spreadsheets and order forms, which will make for less writing orders out by hand.
2. The most complicated is to create a shopping cart type ordering form where they only click on the items they want and it automatically gets tallied in your computer. This is for the total techies, which is not usually us farmers.
3. You can do something much less complicated that will still save you lots of time and frustration. Email the customer a list with a _____ in front of each item for them to put the amount they want of that item (be sure to indicate for each item if they should specify weight, pound, head, bunch, etc). You simply print out their email and you have the list of what you need to put in their bags. To know the full quantity of what you need to harvest, print out a blank copy of the order form and tally each of the orders on your master order form.
4. Make sure that when you say what you have that you set it up so that they can only order exactly what you have. If you create an order form for them to fill out, you reduce the likelihood that somebody will request 2 lbs when you've specifically said you offer heads.
5. Always indicate price of each item.
6. Always specify in each email how payment will be made (do you take credit cards? Checks? And when do they pay? Late fee?) Even if these are regular customers, they may forward this email to someone else.
7. Always specify in each email where and when the order is to be picked up or delivered.
8. Always specify what your policy is if orders exceed the amount of product you have that week (never say "if we don't have enough" or "if we run out").
9. It's good to send out an order confirmation with the amount due AFTER you have harvested to crop.
10. Consider a minimum order amount, as sales amounts have to be worth the time it will take you to fill these orders and deliver them.

G. You email list grows naturally as customers forward your emails to friends.

1. One farmer says they get orders every week from someone that was not on their email list and that their number of orders have doubled since they started this.
2. You can offer a deal to email customers who bring in new email orders (dozen eggs, loaf of bread, pound of salad mix, collection of your favorite recipes, etc.).

IV. ONLINE SELLING (with electronic financial transactions)

A. You can sell products online via your website, email or an online store.

1. This is a good option for producers who produce more than their local markets will buy, or a product not favored in their local area. For example, your community many not be interested in medicinal herbs, but lots of people out there are.
2. Non-perishable products are best.
3. You can sell perishable products if selling locally or have excellent packaging and shipping methods.

4. Make order forms easy to understand and use for the customers and you.
5. Make order forms that adequately describe product and product unit (lb, head, bunch, etc)
6. Always indicate price of each item.
7. Always specify how payment is to be made.
8. Always specify where and when the order is to be picked up or delivered. If you only sell to a particular area, it is critical to say this or you may get people in Montana expecting you to send them the lettuce they ordered.
9. Always specify what your policy is if orders exceed the amount of product you have.
10. Specify minimum order amounts.
11. Keep you order form current. Quickly mark items sold out so do not have to contact people to tell them you cannot fill their order. (plus "sold out" indicates it's a hot item and makes more people want to try that item.)
12. Send order confirmation.

B. If you decide to sell products online, use www.allprofitallfree.com site for reference.

C. Online Sales work best if you take credit cards.

1. You need to assure potential customer that you are trustworthy. Do this with testimonials, lots of pictures of you, your farm, your products, and list organizations you are affiliated with.
2. You need to assure potential customers that their financial transactions are secure. It may be hard to convince some folks that a farmer figured out how to keep computer hackers from getting in and stealing their credit card info.

D. You can easily get set up to take credit cards or checks using PayPal or similar electronic paying systems that people recognize as secure systems for making financial transactions.

1. They charge about 3% per transaction.
2. People are more likely to trust the transaction if it goes through one of these recognized hacker-safe systems.

E. You can participate in online storefronts like www.LocalHarvest.org or www.supermarketcoop.com if you don't want to do any of the above, but do want to sell online.

1. They charge about 15% per transaction.
2. This is especially smart if you have a nonperishable product that would be great for seasonal sales, like Christmas
3. Local Harvest works by advertising your product both through email notices and through their website (which gets 6,000 visitors a day). The way it works is you set up an account with LH. LH puts your products with your descriptions and pictures on their site. Customers order your products from LH and pay LH through the LH secure electronic paying systems. LH emails you the order and puts the money in your LH acct, minus 15% that they keep for handling the transaction. You ship the order. Twice a month LH mails you a check for all the orders for your products that have been placed through the LH website.

4. If 15% sounds like a lot to pay an online store to get your products sold, consider what you are getting for the 15%. You can reach a world-wide customer base even if you are in podunk America -- an average of 6000 of them visiting LH each day, all year long with peaks in holiday seasons (other online stores may have similar numbers visiting their sites). You have NO advertising expenses. You have NO website or order form design costs or time investments. You have NO website hosting fees or maintenance costs or time investments. You have NO extra expenses for offering secure financial transactions.

SUMMARY

- Choose which use of the internet to get customers best fits your needs, depending on what your products are, how much time you have to spend on this and who you think your market is.
- Everyone who has a farm product to sell should get listed on LocalHarvest and other free farm directories.