

Selected Topics for On-Farm Direct Marketing

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Introduction

On-farm direct marketing provides a means to capture retail prices for produce grown on the farm and can be an outlet for other value-added products. Typically, on-site facilities are developed into a “roadside” stand operation that is open to the public and keeps regular business hours throughout the year or during the growing season. Other forms of direct-market enterprises may be as simple as an unattended self-serve stand (Figure 1), off-farm roadside stands, participation in local farmers markets, staking out a busy street location for temporary “tailgate” sales, a pick-your-own (PYO or u-pick) operation, a CSA (community supported agriculture) venture and Internet and mail order sales.



Figure 1. Direct marketing in its simplest form, a self-serve checkout station near a backyard market garden. (Photo by A. Bratsch).



Figure 2a. Merchandizing product simply: small sign and basket of peaches placed to catch drivers attention near busy street corner and roadside market in Roanoke, Va. (Photo by A. Bratsch)



Figure 2b. Merchandizing product by atmosphere development: country market and orchard with emphasis on apples. (Photo courtesy of Mills Apple Farm, Marine, IL. <http://www.millsapplefarm.com>)

Regardless of the type of product sold or the method used, some degree of “merchandizing” is employed to help sell the product, whether it is simple signage on the side of the road, or development of a distinct, theme oriented market (Figures 2a, b). Even a u-pick operation can use merchandizing to increase sales; for example providing directions for customers on how to

freeze and can large amounts of produce, and providing neat, organized field plantings. The proper **display** of agricultural products in farm market settings is part of an effective merchandising program that also includes: **product promotion, pricing, and customer service.**

In a successful enterprise, merchandizing skills are equal in importance to crop-production skills.

This publication addresses issues related to the effective merchandizing and sale of on-farm products and provides suggestions for roadside market development and improvement. These ideas can easily be adapted for many diverse direct-market settings, and are presented as guidelines for consideration.

Overall Market Appearance and Functionality

Build a market theme. Of all the merchandizing elements, atmosphere is the least tangible, but one of the most important for increasing sales. From a business perspective, roadside markets are true “specialty stores,” similar to the uniqueness of specialty product stores found in the local mall. Products offered at roadside markets are unique. Whether customers recognize it or not, they come to a farm or roadside stand expecting an experience. They want the “rural and country” effect they cannot find at commercial grocery stores.

The “atmosphere” begins with how the market site is situated on the farm and in relation to various outdoor farm elements. When possible, the market should be in proximity to crops in the field. Adding antique farm implements, bales of straw, animal pens, and renovated and brightly painted sheds and buildings can all add to outdoor appeal and a rural and country atmosphere. The presence of a small lake or a pond is an added draw. The market construction itself – low ceilings, wooden beams and floors – and the use of farm-related decor all contribute to a thematic atmosphere (Figures 3a, b, c, d). Avoid the extensive use of garish designs, bold wallpapers, and brightly colored paints in the interior;



Figure 3a. Antique farm truck parked in front of market conveys country feel and doubles as a fall mum display unit. (Photo by A. Bratsch)



Figure 3b. Renovated fruit packing shed serves as rustic on-farm market site for busy orchard. (Photo by A. Bratsch)



Figure 3c. Wood floors, paneling and display units add to country feel of this market. Note open floor space and bulk bin use. (Photo by A. Bratsch)



Figure 3d. Antique farm tools display creates ambience in roadside market. (Photo by A. Bratsch)

they can compete for customer attention and distract from the products being sold.

Evaluate products being sold to make sure that they fit in the atmosphere being created. As noted, the market is a true specialty store. How well does a non-farm item fit? Is it in some way related to agriculture? Do crafts

and other art items have a country flavor? Avoid grocery store junk foods, cheap toys, and gimmick items that have no relevance to farming. Homemade baked and canned goods should not have to compete for shelf space with commercial, prepackaged products. If ice-cream bars, beef jerky, soda, and candy must be sold to satisfy customer demands, place these items in their own contained space in the market or cooler.

Promote fresh and local. Produce that is promoted as “fresh and local” should always be a key market theme. Again this theme builds on selling products that are not readily available in grocery stores. Remember, customers can buy produce at any grocery store; what sets the on-farm market apart and provides appeal is the concept (and reality) of the superiority of produce that is locally grown and fresh. “Fresh” conveys better flavor and quality, and “local” instills loyalty to the farmer, the region, and giving business to a recognizable person versus a corporate entity.

Grow what sells, not sell what you grow. Every market eventually acquires its own identity and personality and becomes a unique experience. Farmers as marketers should have an understanding of the public’s perception of their market, of what sells, and the buying habits of their customers. An old adage says, “Grow what you sell, not sell what you grow.” It is important to provide what people buy. It is usually the day-to-day, commonly used products such as tomatoes, cucumbers, and apples that make up the bulk of sales. Though so-called “minor crops” provide diversity, their sales are also minor in relation to products that people consume regularly and are familiar with. An example of typical produce buying patterns at roadside markets is provided in Table 1.

Consider foot traffic layout. The grounds and market layout should be thoroughly planned, and adapted with time. As customers arrive, they predictably will flow or move through the facility in some way. From a merchandizing perspective, this pattern should be used to full advantage, regardless of market size. Every large grocery store anticipates and plans for customer movement and everyone recognizes promotional displays strategically set at the ends of aisles. Similarly, the roadside market operator has the opportunity to control and affect that movement into a recognized pattern. Displays and general layout should encourage the customer to “shop the market” in its entirety. This can be done through a variety of methods including changing aisle width and length, and locating various dis-

Table 1. What Customers Buy at Roadside Markets.¹

Product	% of customers
Fruits	
Apples	90.0
Peaches	82.3
Cantaloupe	66.5
Strawberries	58.2
Plums	45.4
Pears	41.2
Grapes	40.9
Cherries	30.9
Raspberries	24.1
Watermelon	5.8
Vegetables	
Sweet corn	85.9
Tomatoes	61.4
Peppers	46.3
Cucumbers	44.3
Snapbeans	36.9
Cabbage	35.9
Lettuce	27.7
Carrots	24.7
Asparagus	17.1
Squash	9.4
Potatoes	7.9
Miscellaneous	
Cider	72.1
Pumpkins	49.0
Honey	48.0
Gourds	25.6
Jelly/Jam	16.0
Bread	15.8
Pies	14.3
Flowers	3.0
Popcorn	3.0
Indian corn	2.8

¹from *Ohio Customers and Their Roadside Markets*, publication # MM 381 (out of print)

play fixtures at key points to gently guide the customer through the market. Strategic location and display of high-demand seasonal items (i.e., “power” items, see below) is another means to encourage the customers to explore the market. Locate checkouts in a prominent, visible location, convenient to parking.

Layout should also consider customer safety and their ease of access and egress, particularly for the disabled and those in wheelchairs. Hidden foot traffic risks such as water on the floor, uneven surfaces, and other possible problems indoors and out should be evaluated. Outdoors, vehicle traffic in parking areas should be well directed, with clearly posted entrance and exit signs. The main entrance should be evaluated for safety. If turn lanes are necessary for customer and vehicle safety at the market entrances, the operator may need to work with the state department of transportation and share in the expense to have these installed.

Develop human resources. Employees are a critical element affecting customer perception of a market. Often, a customer’s interaction and experience with a single employee will be what is remembered most about the market. This makes training employees about customer service imperative. Employees should be friendly, people-oriented, helpful, and knowledgeable about every product sold, including how it was grown. Employees are the face of the market; they leave its most lasting impression and can be its best promotion. Therefore, regularly evaluate employee interaction with customers. If an employee is not working out as a checkout clerk, maybe his or her talent lies in tasks not involving customer contact. Think about integrating employee appearance as part of the market theme, for example: wearing promotional clothing. It goes without saying that neat, clean, and presentable should be part of the employee package.

Pointers for Developing Effective Displays

Displaying goods for sale can be as much art as science. Yet there are guidelines to consider when laying out a farm market: where displays are located and how they are built and maintained. Each marketing situation is different and market operators will need to adapt ideas that provide the best response from their customers. This may involve testing and observation to determine how effective a particular display may be. A healthy market is dynamic and continually changing to meet consumer demand.

Change locations for displays on a periodic basis. From a merchandizing standpoint, diversity and regular change in the market promote a positive and energetic atmosphere. Move or change displays and fixtures to meet the needs of the season. For example, bulky pumpkins may need space in the fall when other vegetables decline in quantity and their need for space. When displays are changed, regular customers tend to focus on the changes, and see more of what is for sale. Just as display locations should change frequently, the way displays are built and presented to customers should change and adapt over time.

As the crop mix changes throughout the growing season, displays should highlight the changes and direct customers to them. These changes will help customers concentrate on the seasonal products, and keep them coming back for new experiences. Product diversity also reinforces the unique on-farm atmosphere, reflects the reality of seasonal change, and the natural variation inherent in locally grown produce.

Recognize and take advantage of “power” seasonal items. Power items are those that customers will make a specific trip to the market to buy, often from long distances, and they result in the greatest sales. These items should be displayed throughout the market rather than grouped together early or late in the shopping pattern. These are highly seasonal items, for example: sweet corn, strawberries, tomatoes, peaches, and fall apples (Figures 4a, b). Certain power items can bring product identity to the market, and customers will come to expect and depend on these items being available at a given time of the year.

Know local demand. Products that meet specific local demands should be advertised and prominently displayed. There may be historical crops that have a specific draw in a geographic area. For example, cushaw



Figure 4a. In-season peaches take center stage in this roadside market. (Photo by A. Bratsch)



Figure 4b. Sweet corn is one of the most popular vegetable crops in the roadside market. (Photo by A. Bratsch)



Figure 5b. Nice fall pumpkin display on old wagon. (Photo courtesy of Cows N Corn, Midland, VA: <http://www.cows-n-corn.com>)

squash is important in one part of Virginia, melons and butter beans in another. Depending on demographics, ethnic demands can be very specific, and the savvy marketer learns to capitalize on these niches. There are also peculiarities in preferences, for example: sweet corn color and name are very important in some localities, while certain varieties of apples are requested by name in some areas. From a marketing standpoint, regional preferences should be recognized, and addressed by growing these crops and promoting their availability at the market.

Use unique and varied display fixtures. Examples of unique display methods include tilt tables, half-barrels, baskets, crates, bins, sacks, wagons, and old buckets (Figure 5a, b, c). Farm antiques, in particular, add character and appeal to a market and can double as display fixtures. Some modern shelving is very practical, sometimes portable and can provide effective multi-level displays. All fixtures used to display should be lined, or cleaned on a regular basis where produce comes directly in contact with it.



Figure 5a. Winter squash and potato displayed in bushel baskets. (Photo courtesy Goshen Community Market, Edwardsville, Ill., <http://www.goshenmarket.org>)



Figure 5c. Sweet corn in large field harvest bins, and next to it, peaches displayed on portable multi-level shelf unit – note both of these are power items strategically located in a prominent spot on the front porch of this market. (Photo by A. Bratsch)

Use a combination of bulk and prepackaged displays. Customers come to a market with differing degrees of desires and expectations. Market tests indicate that when customers are given the opportunity of selecting individual items from bulk bins and/or have a choice of sizes of prepackaged products, they tend to buy more products than if restricted to either bulk or standardized prepackaged products (Figure 6).

Allocate additional floor space around bulk displays. Customers will take more time to select individual items from bulk or loose displays than from displays that are prebagged or packaged. This customer behavior means more floor space is needed around bulk displays to allow for easy movement around people who are shopping at such displays.

Use iced displays. For some markets, it may be more desirable to buy an ice machine and display some products on a bank of ice rather than refrigerated display cases. Ice displays impart a “fresh” look, and have the



Figure 6. Prepackaging cherry tomatoes in plastic clamshell pack may be the best option for selling these perishable and soft items, versus bulk, loose displays, yet both options should be employed
(Photo by A. Bratsch)

advantage of not only keeping the product cold, but also providing a moisture shield that can reduce shrinkage due to loss of moisture. Customers also have easier access to products in an open display versus in a display case. Iced displays must be engineered to remove water and should be replenished on a regular basis as the ice melts. Produce should not be left floating.

Mass displays sell. A large display will tend to draw customer’s attention. Hence, a large-size or mass display will tend to move more products than a smaller display located at its customary spot on the shelf or table. Massed displays convey abundance and farm freshness (Figures 7a, b).

Offer field-run crops. Some crops can be displayed and sold in bulk boxes brought directly from the field. As “field-run,” the produce is left in the harvest bins used in the field, and only limited sorting or grading is done. Although field-run sales may be of use for only a few crops, it accomplishes several things. First,



Figure 7a. Mass display of ornamental corn, with bulk-bin displayed miniature pumpkins below.
(Photo by A. Bratsch)



Figure 7b. Apples in mass display in center of roadside market.
(Photo by A. Bratsch)

it reinforces the idea that this is a farm market; second, it permits the operator to offer special prices (with many crops the packaging and grading expense may be greater than producing the crop); and third, displaying field-run products offers customers an additional choice.

Group items of similar use together. Place groups of vegetables such as salad-mix items, or staple fruits and vegetables that may be used together fresh or in cooking combinations in close proximity. Depending on geographic location, there can be regional culinary specialties to consider. For nonfood items, consider grouping items in “centers” for easy access and shopping. For example, group processing equipment such as peelers, jars, and freezer bags together and books and reading materials, etc. all in one area. Avoid scattering these items throughout the store, where they can distract customers from produce displays.

Low-volume items can be located near high-volume items. If peaches move readily at the market and some other fruit does not, then the fruit which is not moving may be helped by locating it near or adjacent to the peaches. Low-volume items can be promoted also by providing suggestions-for-use or recipes cards near the display.

Use color, texture, and size contrasts in displays. A display that uses a mixture of red, green, and yellow colors commonly found in fresh produce will tend to attract the eyes of customers (Figure 8). Red and orange, in particular, impact the eye and are retained in memory. Avoid continuous green produce displays which can tire the eye and cause the customer to overlook items. Also take advantage of differences in produce texture and size. Variation and diversity in displays created by texture and size contrasts encourage exploration of the



Figure 8. Open-air farmers market display utilizing color, texture and high quality produce. (Photo courtesy Goshen Community Market, Edwardsville, IL <http://www.goshenmarket.org>)



Figure 9b. Natural light backlights fresh honey display in market. (Photo by A. Bratsch)

display by customers. However, avoid busy or otherwise distracting displays, or displays that are too small to convey the desired contrast and may be overlooked.

Aggressively monitor produce appearance. Bulk or loose displays of products will need to be carefully monitored to make sure unacceptable produce (wilted, shriveled, rotted) is promptly removed. Packaged displays should also be monitored and reworked if they are not selling promptly or begin to show age. Do not discount and sell aged product.

Use accent lighting. Accent lighting refers to the use of special lights such as spotlights or special fluorescent fixtures to highlight a specific display (Figure 9a). Accent lighting is more effective when overhead lighting does not overwhelm the accent lighting. Natural light can also be used effectively (Figure 9b). In general, roadside markets should be bright and cheery in atmosphere.



Figure 9a. Florescent lights (rear) and window brighten up dark market corner and highlight canned products. (Photo by A. Bratsch)

Checkout area should have “impulse” items within easy reach. Specialty gift packs, nuts, honey, jams, and homemade candy can be as much as 50 percent of total market sales. These items should be within view and reach of customers as they approach or wait at the check out. Avoid displaying candy bars, chewing gum, junk food, and other items that are reminiscent of the local grocery store. Most customers with young children will appreciate the absence of items that are attractive to kids as they wait in the checkout line. Remember the market is a specialty store and any item for sale in it should be reviewed closely for its marketability and perception of fitting that niche.

Keep displays at effective heights. Effective displays should be kept high for viewing. Keep bulk/bin produce displays at 46 to 50 inches. Place packages and items to be viewed from “straight-on” on shelving 54 to 60 inches high, eye level or slightly below.

Some reasons why produce should **not** be displayed on the ground or floor:

- Pests get into the produce – ants, cockroaches, mice, and more.
- Product gets kicked, stepped on, knocked over, bruised, and abused – especially when there are crowds of shoppers.
- Dust and dirt kicked up by passing feet settles more heavily on produce displayed at lower levels.
- Lowers customers’ esteem for the product. Elevation enhances a product’s stature and prestige. A product to be served at the table deserves to be displayed on a table.

- Dogs have difficulty distinguishing between a bushel of cabbage and a fire hydrant.
- Customers can't "hear" the product. Good products can sell themselves if they can "talk" to customers. To do so, the product has to be close enough to the eyes, nose, and hands so the customer can see, smell, and feel what the product is "saying."
- Reduced light intensity at lower display levels means reduced visibility. Light intensity declines or falls off by the square of the distance from the light source. Thus a product displayed 8 feet from a light (floor level) would receive only one quarter as much light as a product displayed 4 feet from the light (chest level). Shadows cast by customers and display fixtures reduces light intensity on floor displays even more.
- Consider customer vanity. Despite designer frames and contact lenses, there are still some customers who won't wear glasses. If the product is right up in front of them, they can at least feel the difference between peaches and apples.
- Products placed on the floor are beyond the customers' grasp. If the product is within easy reach, customers are more likely to buy. To hold and to handle is the first step in buying.
- The focus should be the product. A low display leaves too many other distractions in view and allows children, other customers, and sales people to all compete for the consumer's attention. Putting the product up under the customer's nose reduces distractions and focuses the mind on the product and the purchase decision.

Other Related Marketing Concerns

Use quality signage throughout the market. Clear, easy-to-read, well-lettered signs communicate prices and draw customer attention to items for sale. Colored paper and markers and unique designs or logos should reflect the atmosphere of the market without creating clutter or confusion. Sign format should be consistent throughout the market (Figure 10). Lettering should also be a consistent size and uniform and when handwritten, done by the same person. Signs communicate the personality of the market and its owners, and creativity and attention to detail are important in this often-overlooked market element. Road signs should be large and legible enough to read by passing motorists (Figure 11).



Figure 10. Consistent sign style (along with creative use of over-ripe squash) is used for each display bin. (Photo by A. Bratsch)

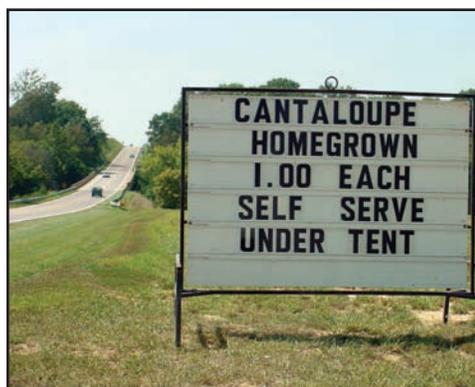


Figure 11. Commercial style sign placed near busy road conveys clear and brief message. (Photo by A. Bratsch)

Refrigeration maintains quality and safety. Horticultural products deteriorate rapidly if holding temperatures are not kept at recommended levels. Ideally, many products should be kept in the 30° to 40°F range to prevent rapid deterioration (Figure 12). There are exceptions, and ideal storage temperatures can vary depending on the product. Various displays



Figure 12. Perishable produce is kept fresh and well-displayed in chest-type cooler. Note "Virginia Grown" banner for promotion of products. (Photo by A. Bratsch)

may not always have ideal temperature and humidity control, for example open displays on ice. Humidity level is especially important for soft fruits and vegetables to prevent moisture loss and maintain fresh “appeal.” Where less than ideal conditions prevail, over-ripe, softened, dehydrated, or discolored produce should be removed promptly. Fresh and clean should always be the cardinal rule for produce displays. For displays outdoors, a shade cloth or other protective measures should be used to keep direct sunlight and excess heat off produce. This may not be an issue for certain crops such as pumpkins and gourds, but most types of produce can be sunburned, fade in color, and quickly lose freshness.

Buy and resell products. Regularly buy certain items to round out the market’s offerings when they cannot be produced on the farm. Available survey information indicates that customers shop at a farm market because of the products’ freshness and quality. Customers do not indicate they are disturbed if some of the products may be purchased elsewhere. Therefore, operators should not be afraid to add something they did not grow as long as it is a quality product. Diversity of displays is a primary consideration and greatly offsets any negative concerns about not being produced on the farm. “Locally grown” should be advertised as such, whether it came from the farm or from a neighbor’s farm. In some direct market situations, such as farmers markets, rules may require a certain percentage of homegrown product.

Clearly price products. Customers are accustomed to and expect to compare prices, so do not be afraid to post prices clearly in the market and in advertising media. In smaller markets where all items can be readily seen from the checkout station, prices posted on display fixtures or a large chalkboard may be enough. In general, it is desirable to have any prepackaged item individually price marked. Pricing labels and signs should be well-done, uniform, legible, creative, and correlate with the produce display (Figure 13).

Decide to use weights or measures. Products may be sold by weight or volume (measure). Properly inspected and legal scales (contact the Virginia Department of Agriculture) should be set-up at the checkout area. Digital equipment can weigh and calculate prices simultaneously. Volume sales by the pint, quart, peck, and bushel do not require weight measures and can be a simpler method of marketing, especially at a pick-your-own operation (Figure 14).



Figure 13. Pricing sign is supported by multi-level display that separates different peach basket/box sizes. (Photo by A. Bratsch)



Figure 14. Fresh blackberries sold by volume in easy to carry basket. Volume sales are free of sales by weight inspection requirement. (Photo by A. Bratsch)

Provide product use information. Recipe cards and other descriptive material on product use are attractive and useful to customers. They can be good marketing tools to increase sales, especially for items that may be unfamiliar to customers. This is important considering the large number of specialty crops available today and the attention they get in gourmet cooking shows and media. Even sales of staple products can benefit by promoting creative new uses and recipes.

Encourage sampling by customers. Have a plan for providing samples to customers (Figure 15). Allow them to taste, smell, or see the differences among products; or sample a new item that may have been just introduced into the market. Offering samples also adds to the feeling that the market is being helpful by allowing customers to judge some aspect of quality before they purchase. Always keep food safety issues in mind; provide disposable utensils/toothpicks for sampling and use removable covers to keep insects off of the samples. Be sure to consult local health regulations before offering samples to the public.



Figure 15. Food sampling area in roadside market. Note disposable plastic sample dishes, toothpick dispenser, and directional notes on table. Sign indicates that all products in market can be sampled. (Photo by A. Bratsch)

Keep pets and other animals out of the market. The farm cat and dog can add a certain degree of ambience to the market, but allowing them and other farm animals in the vicinity should be carefully considered for several reasons:

- Pets and customer safety. Consider the friendliness of the animal (particularly dogs), but more importantly the cleanliness of the produce. A cat using a dirty litter box and walking over bulk displays represents a significant health hazard. If rodent control is a primary reason for the cat's presence it may be advisable to use another method.
- Farm animal safety concerns. Farm animals can add to market atmosphere, and are a draw for families with young children (Figure 16). However, many farm animals can be carriers of disease organisms such as *E. coli* bacteria via their feces. All farm animals should be excluded from the produce display and sales area. If the market has incorporated a petting zoo nearby,



Figure 16. Animal displays draw market customers with children. (Photo by A. Bratsch)

customer traffic to and from this area should be scrutinized. Hand-washing stations with soap, water, and single-use towels should be provided and set-up near the animal area and/or before entering the sales area. Recent studies have shown the waterless sanitizing gel products to be very effective at reducing microbial infection rates. Never charge customers for hand washing materials.

- Some customers may be allergic to or afraid of animals while some children may be overly friendly and rough with them. Keep in mind that farm animals can kick, bite, and peck.
- Pets and other animals can attract flies and other insects that spread disease.

Consider liability protection. Liability is an important issue for all businesses, and lawsuits in farm-market settings are commonplace. Take every realistic measure to reduce customer risks and legal liability by keeping displays and the general market area and grounds safe and take precautions in produce handling to reduce food contamination risks.

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