

Communications: Your key to Customer Loyalty



What is communication?

“Transferring information about your market, your farm or your business ...

In such a manner as to convert the connection with consumers into a sale.”



In other words, building a relationship with your customers.

Why?

- Educate
- Inform
- Engage
- Relationship building



Communicating with your customers serves a very important service. It educates your consumers about you, your farm and your products, your production methods and anything else you need to impart to your customers

It may also be about information. You want to communicate what new crops will be coming into season, what new cheeses you are preparing and will be bringing to market.

Engaging your customer is certainly gaining in importance as a marketing tool. It is no longer just about education and information. It is all about engaging your customer, getting them involved, whether it is discussion on what veggies they would like to see you grow, a discussion about ag practices or an exchange of local food recipes. Customers that are engaged in your business develop a loyalty toward you. You become “their” farm and they support you with increasing sales and referrals.

What this all boils down to is that communications should help you to build relationships with your consumers. Relationships are what transforms a potential customer to a buying customer and a buying customer into a loyal customer who shops only with you and will promote you to friends and family.

Effective Communication is:

- Clear
- Concise
- Consistent



The image shows a slide titled "Effective Communication is:" with three bullet points: "Clear", "Concise", and "Consistent". Below the text are two logos. On the left is the Walmart logo, which consists of the word "Walmart" in blue and yellow, with the tagline "Save money. Live better." underneath. On the right is the Community Markets logo, which features a stylized carrot with green leaves, the text "Community Markets" at the top, "Creating Markets for Communities" in a smaller font, and "The FARM COMES TO YOU!" in a large, bold font. At the bottom of the Community Markets logo is a small "Contact Us" button.

There is no room for ambiguity in your communications. Your customers need to completely understand what you are trying to convey.

Your message should be concise – a few words can tell your story. Look at Walmart – Save Money. Live Better. A simple slogan spells out their philosophy. While we may not agree with or even like Walmart, they know how to effectively communicate with their customers.

Your message also needs to be consistent. Every communication stays with the main message you want to convey about you, your farm or your market. People will come to recognize your communications just by the consistency in message. When Nike says Just Do it. You don't need to be told that it is Nike telling you that. The message is recognized.

In NY, we have farmers market organizer who's message is "The Farm Comes to You" This is a fitting message for a farmers markets and certainly tells potential consumers what to expect.

Starts with branding

- Definition: it is your identity, tells people who you are, what you are about
- Consists of logo, tagline, typography, colors, attitude and regular, predictable delivery (all employees MUST wear name tags)
- Your brand should elicit a positive response
- Used in every communication, it should:
 - Draw new customers
 - Reflect your business
 - Create loyal customers
 - Show professionalism



Effective communication begins with branding. Your brand identifies who you are and what you are about. It's not just your logo or a slogan, but it is the coloring, the font and the attitude conveyed that marks your brand.

The farm logo shown here, clearly indicates the kinds of products consumers can expect from this farmer – produce and flowers. It says it in an attractive, eye pleasing manner.

Your brand should be delivered at every opportunity – for example, on your clothing, employee name tags, price cards and signage.

Your brand should be instantly recognized by consumers and when it is recognized, it should elicit a positive response.

Every communication should include your brand, whether it is written or verbal communication. You want to put your brand forward at every opportunity to build recognition. It is that recognition that:

- Draws new customers to you
- Reflects the nature, quality and philosophy of your business
- Creates loyal customers
- And shows a professional quality to you and your business.



As I said, brands should be instantly recognizable and elicit a favorable response. Can you identify these brands and do they bring about a favorable response from you?

This shows the power of branding.

To build your brand:

- Know yourself
 - Describe key words that describe your business
 - List consumer perceptions of your business
 - What misconceptions are there about you and how can you dispel them.
- What is your mission?
 - How does your business practices reflect that mission
 - Are you reaching the best possible customer demographic?

Know that we know the importance of a brand, let's get started

Take out pen and paper and let's begin.

First you must fully understand who you are:

Your brand should be:

- Specific and unique to your business
- Have long term staying power
- Consistent, since it is your identity
- It should be able to “travel”
 - Different media (web, print, video)
 - Easy to understand and transmit
 - Evolutionary



Here are few more considerations when you develop your brand.

- Since this is your identity – it must be unique to you.
 - Look at the two logos to the right. The logos are so similar that it causes consumer confusion. Starbucks is certainly more universally recognized. The NYS Pride of NY program, an ag product branding program, is often confused with the Starbucks logo. At the NY State Fair, the Pride of NY program has a pavilion to sell local foods, but consumers constantly remark about how excited they are to see a Starbucks shop at the State Fair!
- Your brand should get at the core of who you are so that it has staying power and doesn't need to be changed. Every time you change your brand, whether it is your logo, your coloring, your slogan or any part of your identity, you have to educate your customers all over again and rebuild that trust. Consistency is key - Look at what happened to Coca Cola. They changed the color of their can from the traditional red to a white can featuring polar bears. Consumers were confused as to the contents of the can – regular or diet? They failed to be consistent and customer reaction lays testament to the staying power of a brand.
- Finally your brand needs to be easily carried over to various forms of media, easily understood and evolutionary. For example, when you see a small yellow box, you instantly think of film.

Crafting your marketing message?

- Know what you want to accomplish
- Primary message:
 - Focus on benefits not features (What's in it for me?)
 - Make it concise and consistent
 - Make it clear – don't make customers work for understanding
 - Simple is best so other people can share it well
- Secondary message: anything else you want to say

Know what your objectives are – I

- Look around you, what are the strengths and weaknesses of your market or business. What are your opportunities and threats. Use this information to help you identify the objectives of your message

Then the message should have one primary message.

- Example: if your strength is that you have a wider variety of vegetables than competitors, make that your primary message.

The message should focus on benefits – What's in it for me?

- The Freeport Farmers Market has the widest selection of locally grown vegetables in Freeport!

Your message should be concise – consumers appreciate short, to the point messages that are easily understood. I don't know about you, but I've seen a lot of commercials on television that are a lot of noise and gimmickry and when the commercial is done, I have no idea what the product was that they were trying to sell me. If I have to work at trying to figure that out, then they definitely have lost a sale.

A secondary message or sub-message can relate additional information. In this example, The market is open 2 days a week, bringing local farmers to Freeport.



Examples: Primary or Secondary?

- The freshest produce is available at the farmers market.
- The fresher the produce, the more nutritional value.
- You're supporting local agriculture.

Communications

- All communications, whether verbal, written or telecast, must incorporate your brand
- The brand presence should not be “forced” into inappropriate situations
- Control as much as you can (logo protections on web, tagline appearance)

Now that you have your message crafted, it's time to deliver it – Keep this rules of thumb in mind:

Incorporate your brand into EVERY communication. AS we said earlier, don't miss an opportunity to put your brand forward. Each time you do, you build recognition and all the benefits that go with it.

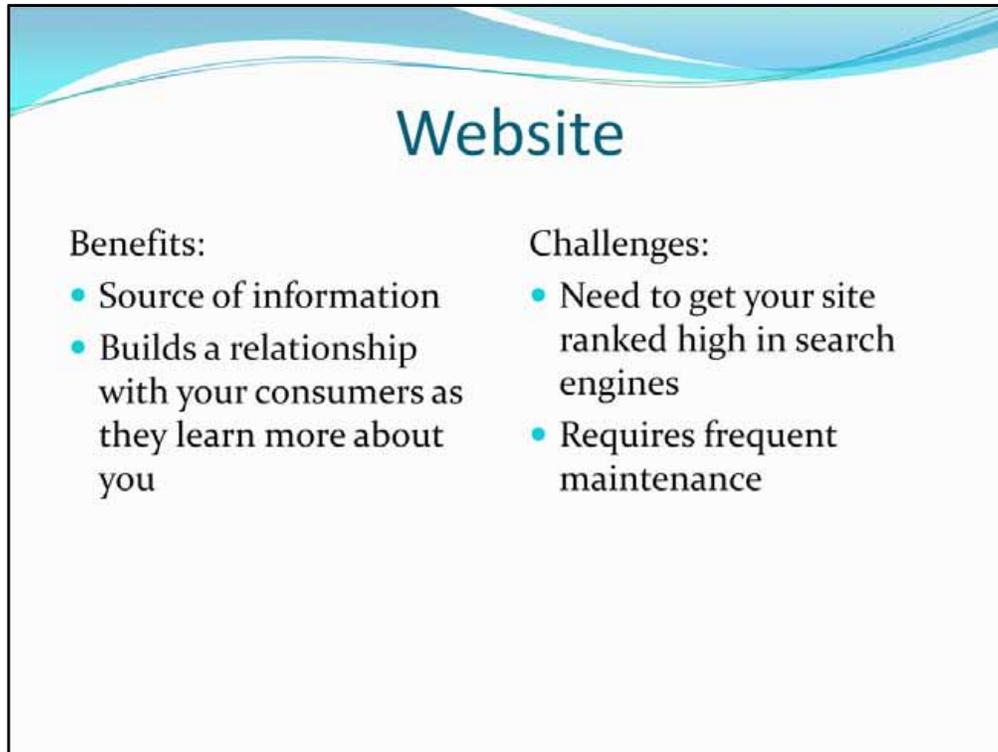
Be sure that your brand is not forced. For example, Kellogg's Frosted Flakes has tried to brand this cereal as a healthy food. Same with Cheerios who tried to brand themselves as heart-healthy and cholesterol reducing food. They were actually required to cease such promotion as misleading and inaccurate. So creating a brand identity that is not an easy fit, can do more harm to you in the long run.

Control as much as you can – trademark your logo, tagline and anything else that may be copied or hijacked by competitors.

How do we communicate?



So let's look at how we can communicate with our customers to build relationships and increase our sales and profits.



The internet is one of the first places people go for information. A website is a must-have for every business, farms and farmers markets included. A good website will have information that will bring customers back to your website, whether it is for times and locations of your markets, updates on the foods in season at your market, or recipes for using in-season produce. The more frequent a visitor is to your website, the more you build a relationship with that customer. And again, we know that customer relationships translate into loyal shoppers and greater sales and profits for your market or your farm.

To be sure your farmers market or farm business is seen by as many potential customers as possible, you'll need to ensure your site is ranked high in search engines. Here are some suggestions to accomplish this:

- Start a blog – search engines like blogs – the content is updated frequently, the content is rich and is not sales-oriented.
- Get your website listed on other websites. Search engines deem websites as worthy when other websites link back to it.
- Getting local press helps, search engines pick up your name . Search engines view news sources as credible and increases your credibility.

You will also need to include frequent updates to your site. For example, keep your list of events up to date. When one has past, eliminate it from the list, but maybe add photos or news clips of the event to entice people to come to the next one. Remember, you need to make your site a place where people will come back to and if you don't keep it updated, you will not get return visitors and you may lose credibility as well.



Here's a sample of a webpage that offers the basic information, is well maintained with frequent updates, new and information, as well as easily found through a google search.

Home page – a source of information for your customers

About us

- The introduce the farm family and your farm history

- Your farm philosophy, mission

What you produce, your production methods, how you are accomplishing your mission, photographs, farm and family stories, special events

Contact us: address, phone #, email

- Where to find us at farmers markets and when

- When the farm business is open to public

Newsletters

<p>Benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Targets your customers with more information• Can solicit sales with special offers• Maintains communication with your customers• Continues to build relationships with your customers• Keeps in touch with your customer base during the off-season	<p>Challenges:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Takes time to prepare• Needs to have a professional look• Cost of mailing: USPS or constant contact acct
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Newsletters are a great way to communicate with your customers. You can provide them with additional information that keeps them “in the loop”. Use this also as a means to stay connected with your customer base during your off-season. Keeping your customer engaged while you are on a seasonal break, helps to ensure their return once you reopen.

There are challenges to maintaining a newsletter. It can take a great deal of time to put together – writing, editing, formatting, as well as maintaining an up-to-date mailing list, whether it’s a mailed or e-newsletter. But to be effective, it does need to have a regular delivery and must have a professional look. You want to set yourself up as a credible source of information, as well as product. So a clean, neat and professional appearance is important.

Another challenge is the cost. A mailed newsletter has to be printed and postage applied. This can add up to a sizable sum as your mailing list grows. An e-newsletter is less expensive, but there may be costs associated with the program you use for delivery. Constant Contact is a great program for an e-newsletter. You can build a quality format, as well as deliver to your email list all from one source. But there is a cost.

The question you need to ask, are the challenges outweighed by the benefits? If you have the resources, a newsletter is a very effective way to build and maintain relationships with your customers.



Here's a sample of an e-newsletter. This is mailed out monthly during the farmers market season, May through October. It gives useful tips on shopping at farmers markets, information about seasonal produce, as well as links back to a website with recipes, hints and tips and resources.

There are key elements that you need to include in your newsletter to make it effective in building customer relationships.:

Include information about your products, what's coming into season

Promote special events, PYO

Pictures are important

Talk about your farm or market to help people develop a sense of ownership in your business

Keep it short, but inviting

Should be no more than a 2-3 minute read.

Don't forget that your branding needs to be clear in the newsletter – your logo, and contact information. But also the color, font and overall tone of the newsletter must be consistent with the brand you have created.

Signage

Benefits:

- Builds brand recognition
- Silent salesperson

Challenges:

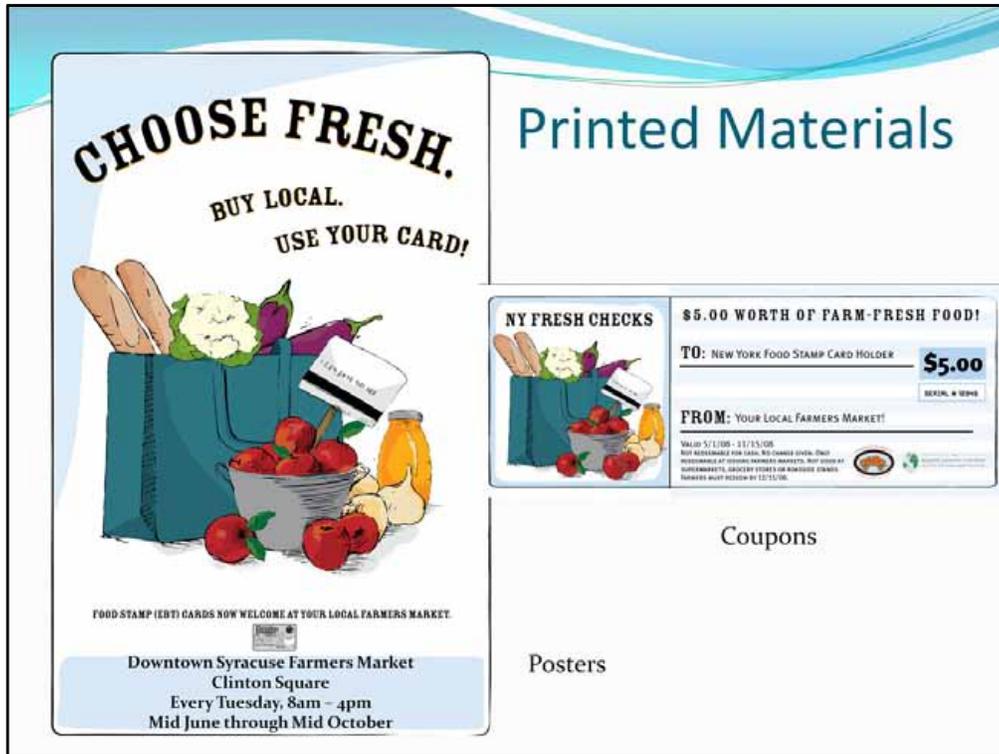
- Time consuming to produce
- Can be costly



Signage is often referred to as the “Silent Salesperson”. This is true because it can relate a great deal of information to your customers. At the market, signage can state the price of your products, but can do so much more. Use the sign to display your logo and farm name. The more you keep your logo in front of your customers, the more memorable it becomes.

Also use your signage to convey information. Include the variety name on your signs and general information about the product. For example, with apples, include the variety name, whether it is tart or sweet, whether a cooking or eating apple, whether it stores well or must be consumed right away. Selling hot peppers, how about the variety, but also the Scoville Heat index to let consumers know just how hot each of your varieties are?

Besides price signage, think about flyers, posters and banners too. These also provide information to your customers.



Like signage, printed materials will communicate with your customers. They may be posters and banners that promote who you are, where and when customers can find you, what types of programs you participate in, coupons and offers that you support.

As with all other forms of communication, all printed materials need to carry your brand – note the same image, coloring, lettering. It helps customers to recognize your business by a simple glance at the printed piece.

Brochure

Benefits: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Builds awareness• With right information it can be a keeper• Colorful and informative• Way to connect to old and new customers• Builds a customer base	Challenges: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can be expensive to produce• distribution
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Brochures carry a larger volume of information than a poster or banner would. But the same principles apply. The brochure needs to carry your brand – your logo, name and contact information, coloring, font and overall image. Your message must be consistent with that used on all forms of communication. This helps to build awareness of your business, your market, letting people know who you are, what you do and how you do it.

To be an effective brochure, meaning people will read it and retain it for future reference, the brochure needs to be a keeper. There must be information inside that a customer will need to keep – a recipe, an events calendar, a list of farmers markets with days, times and seasons. Think about what you can include in your brochure to encourage your customers to keep your brochure and refer back to it again and again.

An effective brochure, much like your newsletter, needs to be colorful, informative and professional looking. It adds to your credibility as a source for information and products.

When you have a brochure that is attractive, informative and a keeper, it will help you to reach new consumers, building a broader customer base.



This is a brochure we use for our state farmers market EBT program. The logo and coloring have been used on every piece we put together for the program – signage, banners, posters and ads. It has effectively branded our program and helps consumers to easily recognize the farmers market EBT program such by recognizing the style of the materials. They know where they see this, they can use their food stamp benefits at the farmers market.

Make it a keeper:

In this case there are instructions for food stamp shoppers on how to use their benefits at farmers markets. But yours should be specific to your operation and in keeping with your mission. It could contain a schedule of special events, a harvest calendar of your farm products, a listing of your markets vendors. Make it something your consumers will want to hold onto as a point of reference.

Correspondence

- Letterhead, business cards
 - should bear your brand
 - Your logo
 - Your tagline
 - Your website, face book and e-mail address
- Company clothing: What you wear can say who you are too
 - Shirts
 - Aprons
 - Caps

Always put your logo and branding on your correspondence. Everyone will know who is contacting them by recognizing your brand, even before they read the signature.

It's always important to promote your brand – use it on your clothing or nametags while you are at the market. Let your customers know who you are in everything you do.

Editorial Media Coverage

- Any non-paid coverage
 - More powerful than paid advertising since it has the ring of truth and credibility
 - Develop relationships with media reps



I won't be going into paid advertising, except to say that media, such as TV, radio and print advertising should always promote your brand. It is your identity and your message and that's what needs to come across in your paid ads.

The same is true for editorial media coverage. It promotes brand recognition, increases your visibility and ultimately your sales and profits. Non-paid coverage is more powerful than paid ads. For example, press coverage of your market opening, or an article about the benefits of farmers markets that quotes you. These types of stories build your credibility and build your reputation as knowledgeable and trustworthy.

How do you get coverage – build relationships with your media representatives. Introduce yourself, keep sending them press releases on your market. Set up photo ops that will help build circulation for their publication or station. Be accessible, when a reporter calls, take the call and provide the information they need.

Press Releases

- Is it newsworthy?
 - New vendors in the market
 - New product
 - Weather related
 - Upcoming event
 - Is it timely?
 - Include a call to action
 - Include a photo op
 - Is it relevant?
 - Must relate to the readers
- Include:
- Contact information
 - Date for release
 - Headline to hook reporters (& audience)
 - Subheading to flesh out story
 - Content (first paragraph is critical)

As I briefly mentioned earlier, a press release is a good way to communicate your markets happenings to the media. Press releases need to answer 3 basic questions before a reporter will consider publishing it.

- Is it newsworthy? In other words, answer for a consumer, “What’s in it for me?”
 - It’s the difference between The market is now open every Sunday, and The market just launched new “Sunny Sunday” market days, giving the entire community more time at the market.
- Is it timely? Does it speak to the media rep that they need to jump on it ASAP. This works well if you arrange for a photo op at a particular time and place.
- Is it relevant? How does it fit with your customer’s lives? Will the readers care

If you can answer yes to these questions, send the press release and it will have a good chance of getting coverage.

Be sure your release covers: (above)

A couple of critical points – make sure the subject line in an email to a reporter is good! It needs to catch their eye among the 100’s of other press releases they receive. Next you need to have all the critical information in the first paragraph. Many times a reporter will only read the first paragraph before making their decision to publish. If you have important information in the second paragraph or later, it will not be considered with the reporter is choosing which press releases will get coverage.

Next: email or fax your press releases. Then you should always follow up. Call, introduce

yourself and then introduce your event. The reporter may have follow up questions they can ask at that time and also puts your Press release at the front of their mind.

Social Media

- Statistics say:
- 2/3 of online population are on social media approximately 10% of their online time
- Over 800 million currently on facebook



Social media has become a key communications tool. Most often, we'll see news and events on social media sites long before mainstream media can get the story out. With the over 800 million people on Facebook alone, it is an important medium for you to use in communicating with your potential customer base. Use this to educate your consumers about nutrition, agriculture, local foods, your market vendors, your market programs, etc.

A graphic with a blue wavy header and a white background. The title 'Social Media' is centered at the top. Below it, two columns of text are presented: 'Benefits:' on the left and 'Challenges:' on the right. Each column contains a bulleted list of points.

Social Media

<p>Benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engages your customers• Great way to showcase your farm or market• Builds consumer relationships• No financial cost• Does not require users to be tech savvy	<p>Challenges:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Requires a time commitment to maintain• Requires frequent updates
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As you continue to post on your Facebook, Twitter, Google + accounts, you provide an opportunity for your customers to become engaged. They can respond to your posts, add posts of their own, but, the point is that they become active in the discussions. Again, it goes back to the idea that an engaged consumer develops a stake or an ownership in the market or business and then you have made a loyal customer.

As people search through social media sites, they will hit upon yours and follow you if you make the page enticing: Keep the conversation flowing, add photos to showcase your market and interest your followers in coming out and seeing the market for themselves. List your market events – the musicians coming to play, the vegetable treasure hunt for kids, cooking demonstrations, etc.

While social media is free, it does have a requirement of a time commitment. The sites must be maintained – adding the photos or videos, links to newsworthy articles, maintaining the integrity of the site while the hosts make frequent changes to the sites. But it is a commitment to post frequently. You can't start a conversation with your consumers and then drop out. You need to keep the conversation alive by continuing to add new posts. This will help generate new discussions and new people to join in.

POS Materials

Promotes you and your brand -

- Recipe cards
- Farm event listings

Include:

- Logo
- Contact information
- Web address
- Facebook/twitter links



What kind of materials do you have at your market or at your farm table to distribute to customers – recipe cards, nutrition information, events listing, for example. Each of these materials should promote your market and your brand.

Use your logo and tag line. Keep the coloring and font the same as all other communications. Again, you want to build brand recognition. It allows people to instantly recognize and elicits that positive response you have worked so hard to have associated with your brand. And that positive response will result in a trip to the market and dollars in your farmers pockets.

Don't forget to include your contact information – not just your street address, phone and email address. Promote your website and your social media accounts by putting those on your POS materials as well.

Face to Face Communications

Do:

- SMILE and Greet
- Get to know your customers
 - Learn their names and their jobs
- Let your customers get to know you.
 - Share your farm stories
 - Share your family stories
 - Recipes and cooking tips
- Invite your consumers back
- Listen



As with all your signage, ads, etc. you need to live your brand. So your face-to-face communications carry that same sentiment and same goal – to build a relationship with your customer .

First, always greet your customers with a smile. It doesn't matter how tired you are or that you just had a huge fight with your spouse. Your problems cannot be put on your customers. Greeting customers is another way to get them to stop in, look over your produce instead of walking by or holding them at your table while you finish working with another customer.

Get to know your customers. If you can call them by name or ask how their child's soccer game went last week, you'll have earned a new friend. One who shows their friendship by buying from you each week.

Share your farm and family with your customer. As your customers get to know more about you and your farm, they begin to feel a sense of ownership in your farm – you become their farmer and they buy only from you.

Be sure to invite your customers to come back. That invitation might be what gets them up and out to the market next Saturday morning. Because you gave them a personal invitation. And you'll see them at your table because of it

And be sure to listen to your customers. They may want to share a recipe with you, as you

have been doing with them. They may have a request – can you grow a different variety of eggplant for them next year? Listen and remember!

Face to Face Communications

Don't:

- Discuss politics, religion, social trends or current events
- Diss other farmers or badmouth other markets
- Ignore consumer questions or concerns, but respond with a positive spin.



There are some important things to remember when having face-to-face communications with your customers. There are certain topics that are strictly off-limits. There is no faster way to ruin a relationship than to bring politics or religion into it. Same for controversial topics, including social trends or events happening in the world that are at all controversial. Do you discuss the Republican primaries or your opinion of the Obama presidency? No – when your opinion is vastly different than your customers, and at least half the time it will be, then you risk alienating a customer.

When a customer refers to another farmer in your market – whether it's because their prices are lower or because they bought an inferior product from that farmer last week, how do you respond? Do you put that farmer down with an insult or do you turn it around so that you have a positive response that still favors yourself. For example, a customer purchased a dozen ears of corn the past week and it was old and tough. She was upset and wanted someone to listen to her. Once the other farmer listened to her, he apologized on behalf of the other farmer and offered to replace it for her, even though it wasn't his. She was so thrilled when she went home with some good corn, that she became a lifelong customer of this second farmer.

When a customer raises a concern about the safety of cantalopes, due to the listeria outbreak this past year, how do you respond. Do you criticize the farm where the problem originated? No, you explain how important food safety is to you and what steps you have taken to ensure that your cantalopes, as well as all your products, are safe. You know, because your family eats them also.



Goals of your Communications:

Build relationships!

- Marketing is about relationships. When you have built a relationship with a customer, you have a much greater chance of maintaining that customer. They feel a part of your farm family and they will help you to protect and promote your farm to others. Ultimately, this is your key to greater sales and profitability.

For more information:

- Farmers Market Managers Training Manual
www.nyfarmersmarket.com/NYFM_Training_Manual.pdf
 - Developing and Implementing a Marketing Plan



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