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**Improved Meat Marketing for Small Scale and Direct Marketing Farms
in the Northeast**

PART I. Understand the customer and their needs: Developing marketing strategy

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For small-scale farms, the need for marketing skills has increased as the local food marketplace has become crowded with more competition. Perhaps 15 years ago the supply of local meat was smaller than the demand, allowing farms to simply “show up and sell out” in their markets. However, here in the Northeast we have seen many farms, both old and new, respond to market demand for local meat and enter the marketplace. In addition, national corporations responded to consumer demands for non-commodity meat, putting many “look alike” products on to grocery store shelves, where they are easy for consumers to grab during their regular food shopping. These pressures of supply and demand require the savvy farm marketer to step-up their game.

The good news is that, even in an increasingly competitive market, applying a few standard marketing techniques will show results. One such technique is to choose a target market and focus your marketing resources on it. Some thoughtful discussion among your farm’s team paired with basic market research should reveal the best target market for your business. Some questions that can help you determine a viable target market are:

- What is the quintessential customer of my farm now?
- How would I describe an exaggerated caricature of my stereotypical customer?

It is tempting to think, “I sell meat to everybody, everybody has to eat,” but with target markets, specificity counts. In fact, the more specifically you can describe your target customer, the easier marketing to them will become. A specific description of your customer should reveal details about their needs, preferences, and the reasons they are more likely to purchase your product. Each target customer has characteristics that you should explore and discuss with your farm’s marketing team (your team may simply be your family, employees and/or friends). The more you can understand about the customer, the better you can communicate to and serve them.

A handy method for working out a description of the target customer is to write a strategy sentence. The strategy sentence describes the customer, their characteristics, and your product. A very specific sentence provides guidance for your marketing efforts which improves the payoff for each marketing investment you make, whether it is a paid ad, a special offer, or the use of your time. An example of a strategy sentence is:

Our farm sells pasture-raised pork by-the-cut to busy working moms with young children who don't have time to slow-cook something for dinner.

If this sentence sounds very specific and a little bit amusing, that's a good sign! When you have created such a sentence, you work to understand the customer as best as possible and answer questions to guide your marketing.

Given the sample sentence, think of how the farm might answer these marketing questions:

- What cuts make sense for this customer? Should we get our pork shoulders ground into sausage?
- How many pounds should each package weigh?
- Is our customer more likely to buy for one meal at-a-time or a large supply?
- Should we sell it fresh or frozen?
- What flavors of sausage would be most popular with young kids? Should sausage be in patties or bulk?
- Where is the best place for this customer to get the product?
- Should we offer home delivery? Should we talk to a local grocer in an effort to get into their meat case?
- When advertising, where can we best reach this customer? What should the message be in our ad?
- What attributes of our farm and product should we highlight in our advertising and materials?
- What is the best format for promotions and what will motivate the customer to make a purchase?

A well-written strategy sentence will provide guidance in every marketing decision right down to the most basic. The specificity of your strategy will resonate with your target customer and pay off better than a broad-casting attempt to reach all consumers. Some folks worry that targeting one specific group of consumers might mean that you lose all the ones that don't fit that description. A valid concern, however, when your brand and product identity are clear it has the effect of attracting lots of different customers to you, not alienating them.

By the way, that strategy sentence, it's not for your brochures or Facebook page! It is a sentence for the farm to use to guide marketing decisions and not made for the public. A well-developed sentence with specific details enables the farm to understand their customers' needs, preferences, and buying habits. This understanding allows the farm to better serve the customer, building a positive and distinct image for the farm.

A strategy sentence can be written for any target customer, including wholesale customers. If you typically sell feeders or breeding stock, you can tailor your sentence to your buyers. The sentence helps you define what the buyer prefers and thus, how to serve them better. Marketing strategy benefits your customers in this way and improves the payoff of every investment you make in marketing!

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