

Solve Labor Problems

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pick-it-yourself marketing to sell other crops in addition to strawberries. Lowe has peas, beans, raspberries and blackberries for customers to pick, while Uniatowski markets some peas, snap beans, lima beans, peppers and tomatoes from the field.

Before customers are allowed in the fields to pick their berries or vegetables, Uniatowski and Lowe have them check in at market stands. Here they obtain picking containers and information on pricing policies, how they should select the best fruit and which areas are to be picked over.

Since some of the fields in Lowe's operation are located a good distance from his market stand, two employees are stationed in the fields with customers. One is responsible for directing traffic to the picking areas and showing customers where to park, the other helps customers in the field.

Uniatowski uses less supervision in the fields, but both

growers agree it is important to control the size of the picking area opened to the public at one time.

"We try to have customers pick over a particular plot at one time so that all of the ripe fruit in that area is harvested," says Lowe. "When nearly all of the mature produce has been picked in that field, we close that area and open another. This practice enables the fruit to mature uniformly and causes less stress on the plants."

Set Own Price

Most farmers are price takers when they sell their products. As individual growers they have little influence on control over the market price. In pick-it-yourself operations, producers have more flexibility in the market. Uniatowski and Lowe know that the price of their crops will be the cost of production, plus a small markup.

Although a pick-it-yourself operator can't let his prices get way out of line with local retail prices, he can usually set them above wholesale prices, according to Ginder.

"Few consumers realize what the normal spread between wholesale and retail is. Thus, a price that is somewhat below retail is usually considered quite reasonable by pick-it-yourself customers."

Uniatowski supplies free picking containers for customers while they're in his fields, but the boxes are turned in when customers check out with their purchases. As long as each customer is using the same sized picking container, there is no trouble determining the total quantity of fruit each customer picks.

Lowe, however, lets his customers keep their picking boxes, adding the cost of the containers to the price of the fruit.

Consumer Demand

One of the keys to successful pick-it-yourself marketing is to have a fairly large population to serve. A good advertising program also helps. Although their facilities are some distance from a major highway or large urban center, Uniatowski and Lowe have had little trouble in establishing a prosperous trade.

"Although we promote our pick-it-yourself operation by advertising through newspapers and radio, the most effective advertisement is a satisfied customer who goes out and tells his friends and neighbors about our farm," says Uniatowski.

Good will also brings back the customers for Lowe. However, he prefers radio spot announcements to advertising in print. "You can let your customers know from day-to-day exactly what you have to pick and how much with radio," he explains.

Most of their customers live within a 30-mile radius of their operations, but Uniatowski and Lowe note that some families drive as much as 60 or 80 miles to pick their own fruit and vegetables.

Pick-it-yourself marketing is not for every farmer, however. A grower must possess certain qualities to make this type of marketing program work. And maybe one of the most important qualities a farmer should have is the ability to get along with the public, says Ginder.

"A pick-it-yourself operator will face all of the aggravations

that most retailers have. He will have to be able to firmly enforce his regulations without offending customers and at the same time be fair and patient," he explains.

Rules For Picking

Few businesses can operate without some rules or regulations. A grower who goes into pick-it-yourself marketing should attempt to make sure his customers understand the rules he has established, adds Ginder. Some of the items that should be spelled out include:

—The minimum quantity of produce that must be picked each time a customer visits the farm. With many crops, however, growers do not like to set a minimum.

—Whether or not the customer supplies the containers to pick in and whether the pickers can take them home.

—The standards used to determine purchases. Will you sell your crops by weight or volume?

—The policy on allowing children in the fields. Some growers have an age limit for children in their fields.

—The picking procedures in the fields. Include the size of

the area to be opened to picking each day and the pattern pickers are expected to follow.

—Opening and closing hours and the days of the week the farm will be open.

—A clearly stated price per unit.


—The span of weeks or days the farm is expected to be open during the season.

—Instructions as to how to choose ripe, high quality produce.

—If produce that is already picked and packed is available, state the cost and where it can be obtained.

Ginder says growers who are thinking about starting a pick-it-yourself operation should realize they're selling more than produce. Although high quality produce is important, growers should remember they are also selling an experience. They are selling an afternoon on the farm. They are selling top quality produce because I picked it myself.

"Pick-it-yourself marketing should be an experience that makes customers willing to drive some distance to get because they can't get it anywhere else."



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