

DEBBIE STILES-RENZI
Staff Correspondent

MORGANTOWN, W.VA. — Some in agriculture still desire to be producers exclusively and let a middleman-wholesaler or other broker do the marketing of their harvest.

However, the majority of vegetable and fruit growers are now seeing the increased profit opportunities presented by direct marketing.

So how does a farmer, after years of selling wholesale, get involved in the retailing of his/her product? Though most enter direct marketing alone after a solitary, sometimes haphazard decision process, a group of over 100 growers, retailers and direct marketing experts gathered in Morgantown recently to share their skills, knowledge, experience and concerns. Many of the "tips" presented by the group founding the new West Virginia Direct Marketing Association have potential application and benefit for most farmers.

Direct markets encompass four types of retail options:

- Tailgate markets, where produce is sold off the farmer's truck, usually from the side of a highway.

- Farmer-owned/operated roadside stands, where the harvested

produce and possibly other products are sold from a permanent structure built beside a thoroughfare.

- Farmers' markets, a city-, county-, state-, or in rare cases independently-owned market set up at a central location for area farmers to bring their produce to sell.

- Pick-your-own operations, which bring the consumer to the farm in order to harvest their own produce.

All four of these options require different levels of management and varying amounts of labor and time commitment from the farmer. They also are similar in several areas, making it possible to learn about direct marketing through study of some basic principles.

KNOW THY CONSUMER

In order for a farmer to be an effective direct marketer, he/she must understand the customer's perceptions.

"Your're dealing with people," Dr. Richard Rund, Horticulturist from Ohio State University put it succinctly.

If farmers want the bigger profit cut that a retail price offers them, they must "read" the consumer correctly, know the market, and use the "tricks" of the retailing trade to get the product sold.

One farmer who has used these "tricks" to a profitable advantage is Boyd Meadows of Milton. In 1970 he farmed strictly for sale to wholesale buyers. Then he opened a roadside market, an open-air market, and began to sell his produce at the Charleston tailgate market as well. Now, with his son in charge of field crops, his wife taking care of the business end and Meadows himself heading up greenhouse production and running the markets, this mild-mannered Cabell county farmer has 45 acres in vegetable production, 50 in apples and peaches, and five in PYO strawberries, in addition to 60,000 square feet of greenhouse space.

Meadows has gone into direct marketing in a big way; since 1970 when his first day's take was a humbling \$28.00, Meadows now has a healthy-six figure gross income with eleven full-time and six part-time employees on his payroll. He lists four things to consider in establishing a roadside market:

- Location. Choose a well-traveled road for the market's location, to insure an adequate sales volume.

- Set Up. Keep things orderly, allow space for adequate parking, and have a full, attractive display area. Meadows emphasized the importance of keeping a display

case full of produce. "If you run out, you didn't have enough to start with," he told the audience. The more that is displayed, the more sold.

- Quality. In the produce business, perhaps more than any other, a reputation is built on a "word of mouth" basis. Advertising, it has been shown in West Virginia, whether it is radio or newspaper, is effective mainly to introduce the new operation to the community initially, or as a means of letting established customers know when crops are ready to pick, and not to increase customer numbers. The produce a farmer sells directly to the consumer must be of premium quality in order that people might "pass the word" — a favorable word—on to their neighbors.

- Pricing. "Three heads for a dollar" sells cabbage better than "Twelve cents a pound". Why? Consumer preferences indicate that certain items are best marketed by the piece instead of by the pound. More produce will be sold if the farmer markets it keeping these preferences in mind.

Other surprising facts to consider at peak months and seasonality of sales. May, Boyd Meadows related, is a "sleeper" month.

While most direct marketers

think July is the top grossing month, in actual fact May is Meadows's top sales period and can be for other producers, too.

Fresh, green, spring vegetables are appealing to the consumer after a long, cold winter.

With a little extra effort and utilization of black plastic and clear poly tunnels, growers can market some early produce when prices are quite favorable and demand is heavy. Of course, using greenhouses to get a head start or to propagate bedding or vegetable plants for consumers is also a moneymaker in spring.

Surprisingly, while getting a jump on spring is advantageous, Meadows warns potential growers of the dangers of selling out of season.

West Virginians are very seasonally-oriented in their food choices, and trying to sell anything, late or "out of season" can be a marketing disaster. "Sell strawberries in strawberry season," Meadows advised.



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