

Listen To Customer

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different apple varieties are readily available for the customer at the store. The store also stocks free apple cider and other items for taste testing.

Trax stressed the importance of keeping up the farm image and making additions to the farm. Also, the farm holds seasonal festivals and tours.

Developing market

Developing a successful farm market involves many years of hard work, according to Joe Strite, Strite's Orchards, Harrisburg. The farm market operates about 275 acres with 13 different kinds of fruit and 30-35 varieties of vegetables.

The key is to "start the season early," said Strite. Customers like to see the large displays and containers filled full. He emphasized the importance of giving the customers a good measure and to pick fruit which is firm, not green or soft, and ripens in a day or so.

Strite's Orchards also grow about 1/2 acre of flowers. However, the business grows no speciality crops, because those crops are hard to sell. "Only a few people want them, and the rest go to waste," said Strite.

According to Strite, good cold storage is necessary as well as the importance of good daily records.

100 percent retail

Bob Best, of Best Farms, Inc., Hackettstown, N.J. grows about 60 acres of fruits and vegetables. The farm market is 100 percent retail, and they recently built a 9,400 square foot facility.

"We grow our own to ensure our own quality," he said. He emphasized the importance of developing trust with the customer. "Take time to talk to the customer," Best said. "They will come back if you are willing to give them honest answers."

Best Farms offers more variety than the supermarket at prices that are at market levels. They also do quite a bit of advertising, he said, which provides an excellent return.

"The greenhouse business has been a tremendous asset to us," he said. "Every year we generate a larger and larger dollar volume."

The farm grows its own apples and freezes cider to sell during the off-season months. They also have a bakery, "which smells great and makes the store smell great — it's a tremendous magnet to the customer." They offer a special apple cider donut with six different toppings, a very popular item. For special occasions, they also provide apples in a basket with a bow on them. The fruit basket market is a very good deal, he said.

Best emphasized the importance of providing a lot of room for the

customer in the store. Keep the aisles wide and have a lot of displays. "The more time the consumer spends looking around, the more they'll buy," he said.

"You have to have specials. It's a way to move out the excess," he said.

Although the recession has hit several farm markets hard, customers continue to purchase quality fruit, vegetables, and greenhouse items, according to Best.

Driving distance

Lynn Moore-Arms, Larriland Farms, Maryland, operates a farm market and off-farm retail market. They maintain about 250 acres and

are open six months out of the year. Although they are south of Baltimore, they are located within driving distance of the large population bases of Baltimore and Washington.

Moore-Arms stressed the importance of locating the facility where people have access to it. Also, setting up "branch markets" may help those who live and work too far away from the central facility.

For those operating pick-your-own facilities, it is important to make them easily accessible. The design should make it easy for the customer to drive in, pick the fruit, pay for it, and leave. Also, the vegetable and fruit crops should be close by.

Moore-Arms also said the business uses checkout counters in the

fields. "This makes the customer comfortable and provides better security for the business," she said.

The checkout counter and other tables are on wheels, which makes them easier to move and position. "They layout is also a big factor as to whether it's a success and whether it draws repeat business," she said.

Quality is paramount, according to Moore-Arms. "And the best thing to do is to spend time in the field listening to what the customers want. They will tell you," she said.

The conference also included the regular meetings of the Pennsylvania Vegetable Growers Association and the 133rd annual meeting of the State Horticultural

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On Tuesday morning at the Pennsylvania Vegetable Conference and Trade show, a panel explored grower experiences with frost control techniques. Left to right, Allan Baugher, who spoke about helicopter use; Milton Knouse, who spoke about wind machines; Ed Durner, Rutgers University, who spoke about chemicals to delay bloom; William Kleiner, Penn State, moderator; and Jim Erb, who spoke about over-tree sprinkling.



Dale Frank, center, and Steve Hershey, right, Elizabethtown, were awarded first place in Class 1 machine harvest (60 or more acres) on Tuesday at the Pennsylvania 1991 Tomato Growing Contest award banquet at the Vegetable Conference in Hershey. Furman Foods, represented by James F. Kohl, vice president, left, sponsored the award.



At the vegetable program entitled "Making Big Bucks," more than 400 attended a panel on successes and failures in retail markets. From left to right, Lynn Moore-Arms, Larriland Farms, Md.; Bob Trax, Trax Farms; Bob Best, Best Farms, Inc., Hackettstown, N.J.; Joe Strite, Strite's Orchards, Harrisburg; and Jeff Patton, extension marketing agent, moderator of the panel. Photo by Andy Andrews.

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