

# Vegetable Conference Offers Marketing Ideas



Discussing the benefits of produce auctions, from left, are Dr. Timothy Elkner, Herbert Gebley, and Romalne Erb.

## Produce Auctions Satisfy Buyers And Sellers

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HERSHEY (Dauphin Co.) —

With new produce auctions popping up across the state, who is benefiting from the surge?

To answer that question, a panel composed of two buyers, a grower, and a customer offered their perspectives at the Vegetable Conference held this week at the Hershey Lodge & Convention Center.

The four panel participants shared what they consider personal benefits and pitfalls of produce markets.

Wilmer Hoover, grower from Elizabethtown, told how he has farmed produce on his 50-acre farm since 1984. According to him, produce auctions are successful when growers bring produce in every day and not just when prices are high.

To provide a consistent market for corn, Hoover said that on his acreage, he plants about two acres of corn every week for 10 to 12 weeks. He does similar plantings for cantaloupe.

Although growers prefer to sell when the price is at the peak, Hoover said that is not realistic.

"If you provide a steady flow of one crop you end up with a better average price. It's better for the buyer, better for the grower," he said.

Growers are expected to grade and neatly package produce.

"A top quality price is given if produce is graded properly and picked the day of the auction," Hoover said.

Romaine Erb, who with her husband operates Brook Lawn Farm in Lancaster, explained that she and her husband can't grow a sufficient supply of fresh produce for their customers. They supplement their own homegrown produce by frequenting a local produce auction.

"The big advantage is that the auction is open six days a week during the peak season. I can count on fresh product and an adequate selection," Erb said.

The produce auction offers buyers the opportunity to inspect lots and even taste for flavor before going over the auction block, Erb said. She has discovered that generally if she needs an item, others do also, and the prices are high.

"But it averages out in the long run if I buy regularly," Erb said. "There are no guarantees that you'll get the price and amount but it's exciting. The advantages of auctions far outweigh an inconveniences."

The disadvantageous are minimal and can easily be worked through, Erb believes. For example, occasionally the top layer may look like top grade, but the bottom layer may not be full or is poor quality. These concerns should be taken to the auction manager who can rectify the problem. Also, buyers learn what growers can be trusted and become loyal to them.

During the busy season, it is necessary to make sure purchases are not stolen before loading, although that is rare. Also, when the auction is crowded, it is difficult to see lots, and long lines may become frustrating while waiting for the needed items to be brought before the auction block.

Erb also sees the produce auction as a means of staying up to date on information with growers and buyers.

Glen Gross operates Ashcombe Farms in Mechanicsburg. He attends three different auctions on a weekly basis throughout the growing season to supplement the produce he grows for his roadside market. Each auction operates differently, he said. The Leola auction allows only homegrown produce but the two Cumberland auctions, have produce shipped in from the South.

"The quality of produce auctions far surpass wholesale markets," Gross said. As a buyer, he insists on full boxes and evenly graded produce.

Herb Gebley manages Kutztown Produce Auction and formerly operated produce auctions in other states. Although Gebley was representing the customer on the panel, the audience asked questions pertaining to his role as auction manager.

"The auction manager is in the middle between the buyer and grower and sometimes we are their best friend and other times their worst enemy," Gebley said of the need to respond to both buyer and grower.

Gebley stressed the importance of maintaining communication with the auction's owner to work out problems for both growers and buyers. The auction manager should trace back lots of questionable quality when a buyer is unhappy. Sometimes boxes that started out full end up half full because some auction goers steal and eat from boxes. Likewise a grower's complaint about requirements for selling through the auction should be voiced. Suggestions and comments should be written with a phone number attached so



Participants attending the 138th annual meeting of the State Horticultural Association find time to socialize and discuss business during the three-day event. From left are Gail McPherson of Maple Lawn Farms in New Park who buys fruit trees from Laura and Wally Heuser of Summit Sales of Lawrence, Mich.

## Creative Marketing For Success

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HERSHEY (Dauphin Co.) —

As a third generation farmer, Robert Matarazzo is always looking for new ways to market not only his produce but those of other farmers.

In addition to farming 100 acres in New Jersey, Matarazzo operates a marketing and consulting firm, RJM Marketing, to aid other farmers in promoting their products.

Matarazzo taught two sessions

problems can be resolved.

"Take advantage of meetings held in the winter to address problems that you think should be addressed," Gebley said.

The audience asked what item of produce is most in demand. Gebley said there is often a need for specialty items or for smaller packages of produce.

Gebley encouraged users of produce auctions to be acquainted with trends. "Certain days, certain items sell better."

Weather also plays a large part in auction prices. Tomatoes tend to bring lower prices through long dry stretches, but higher prices after a rain. If you have tomatoes or peaches that can be held several days for a more favorable market, Gebley encouraged it as long as quality was maintained.

Most buyers want peaches and tomatoes firm, not ready-to-eat.

Buyers include homeowners, people who sell produce, restaurants, food banks, groups of families, farm markets, wholesalers, and chain food markets.

Growers in the audience voiced several complaints about the auctions requiring them to pay for bulk containers and bins. Gebley recognizes their frustration and said that many auctions offer coupons for returned bins and containers.

Someone from the audience said, "I get the impression that produce auctions are better for the buyer than the seller."

But Hoover, who is a grower, maintained that the benefits work both ways.

"Every one needs to make money to survive," Gebley said. "Cooperation and communication will help us all to survive."

at the Vegetable Conference held this week at the annual meeting of the State Horticultural Association in Hershey. One session dealt with developing new wholesale markets and the other with new retail markets.

To develop new markets, Matarazzo suggested growers take a look at the following sources: restaurants, specialty stores, chain stores, pharmaceutical companies, food service, caterers, processors, roadside markets, brokers, auction blocks, terminal markets, hotels, amusement parks, groceries, and deli's.

Draft a letter to send to all potential buyers. Explain about your farm and why they should consider you. Promote your quality and service. Define your commitment. Provide a separate page for your product list. Close with a thank you and a plan to follow up.

Other possibilities include visiting buyers, providing promotional material even if it is just a list of products and availability dates,



Robert Matarazzo taught sessions on marketing by retailing and wholesaling. Here Matarazzo shows the book he wrote called "Marketing for Success, Creative Marketing Tools for the Agricultural Industry."

offering samples when product is available, and inviting the buyer to your farm for a tour.

As a grower, Matarazzo thinks it is important to differentiate your produce from other growers so that people look and ask for your produce.

"Stickers are the wave of the future," Matarazzo said of the little stickers attached to individual tomatoes and produce. He suggests printing a logo with your farm name to be attached to produce.

In addition, he encourages providing educational information to give to produce managers, who often are not up-to-date on the health benefits of items. Tips on care, preparation, and recipes also encourage sales.

Fax machines are great tools for growers according to Matarazzo. He suggests faxing out a list of the produce available every morning to save phone calls. If necessary, phone calls can be used to follow up.

Creativity in developing new markets encourages new sales. Prepare a dish using the produce or suggest recipes to restaurant owners. Offer to promote the product in the store.

### Most Effective Ways To Be Successful In Farming Business

The most effective ways to be successful in the farming business is to focus on developing retail markets, according to Matarazzo.

"Quality products are by far the most effective tool that we have," Matarazzo told conference goers.

He also stresses the need for educate a knowledgeable, friendly, and enthusiastic staff to be honest but not to divulge detrimental information such as the hail has ruined all the peaches.

The Matarazzos host 14 festival events annually on their New Jersey Farm. Because they do not live along a main road, they need to find a way to entice customers from 40 miles away. Some successful events are Family Harvest, Pow Wow, and Peach and Bluegrass Festival.

Not only does this attract new customers but newspapers often write ups about the events, which

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