

Extended-Season Produce Key To Keeping Customer Relations

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30-40 acre category (some grow as little as 5-10 acres of produce).

The cooperative chose Washington, D.C. since it proved to be the closest large metropolitan market. Growers, said Fullerton, faced an unreliable wholesale market for their produce.

In the first year the cooperative moved 1,500 cases of produce with modest success. The cooperative has experienced steady growth in the years since, at 30-50 percent per year. Last season the cooperative moved 35,000-40,000 cases to 50 different customers in the Washington, D.C. area, half restaurants and the rest retailers.

Fullerton, who joined the cooperative in 1993, has seen the main warehouse go through a few expansions. The cooperative, though, has "always been grower-driven, grower-directed," he said.

The key for the cooperative — and perhaps any niche marketing enterprise — is to grow as much as possible throughout a longer season, lengthening it to stay in touch and work with the buyers as much as possible. Use of seasonal extension technology comes in handy for growers in the cooperative so they can stay "engaged with the customers," Fullerton said.

To ensure continuous supply of vegetables to the Washington markets, Fullerton said the co-op has developed a working relationship with a Vermont-based co-op to sell Vermont carrots through the winter season.

The co-op remains "desperate for anything that will provide fresh and green produce for the winter," he said.

Tuscarora Co-op supplies 20 different varieties of tomatoes in the season, besides flowers, mushrooms, carrots, organically grown tree fruit, garlic and storage onions, and others. Tomatoes are the number-one seller, but heirloom tomatoes, cherry tomatoes, and plum or Roma tomatoes are also important. The co-op also markets lettuces and other salad greens, head lettuce, and speciality salad greens. They also grow plenty of standards such as zucchini and yellow squash, green beans, eggplants, collards and kale, bell peppers, cucumbers, bets, and melons.



"Our growth has not come in finding more customers, but supplying existing customers with what they want over a long period of time," said Chris Fullerton, Tuscarora Organic Growers Cooperative, Hustontown. He spoke Wednesday afternoon during a special session on farmers' markets, auctions, and cooperatives at the 2000 Mid-Atlantic Fruit and Vegetable Convention at the Hershey Lodge and Convention Center.



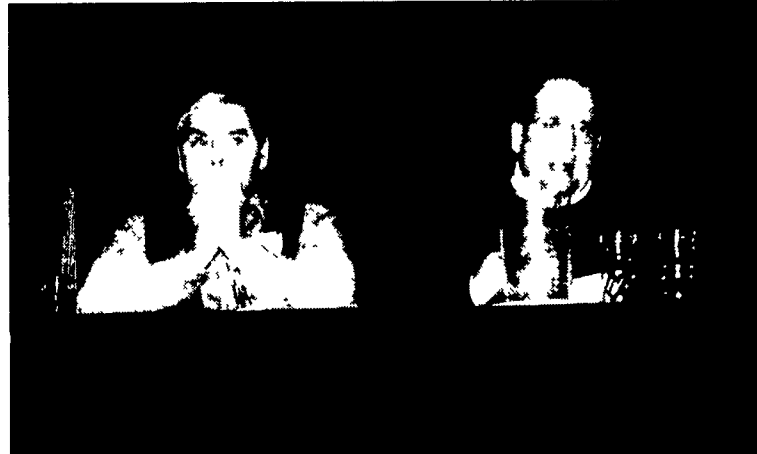
Neil Courtney, left, and Moses Sensenig at the farmers produce auction session of the fruit and vegetable convention in Hershey.

Successful Produce Auctions

Each farmer creates their own reputation with individual buyers at a produce auction, according to Paul W. Leinbach of Leinbach Produce Auction in Shippensburg.

So it's important that the quality and packaging and overall presentation is right, and let the product "speak for itself," said Michael Snyder, manager of the Leola Produce Auction.

"The quality of the containers says something about the quality



Paul Leinbach, left, and Mike Snyder spoke during a special farmers' market session of the fruit and vegetable convention.

of what is in the container," said Neil Courtney, manager of the Buffalo Valley Produce Auction, Mifflinburg.

Leinbach said packaging is "definitely the key to sales at the produce auction."

Several regional produce auc-

tion managers spoke about their experiences during the season Wednesday afternoon at the farmers' market portion of the Mid-Atlantic Fruit and Vegetable Convention.

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