

PLAN YOUR SALES STRATEGY NOW

I believe I've written this before, but just in case you haven't heard it said, you should be planning the sales of your fruit and vegetable crops now, before you've even harvested the first piece of fruit or planted the first vegetable seed.

The markets for tobacco, corn, and soybeans are about as poor as they were last year at this time. The current situations in dairy and pork are poor as well. As with last year, this means more growers will be growing vegetables and fruit on their farms. With so many choices for a buyer, why should they choose your produce over your neighbors?

Max E. Brunk, formerly of Cornell University, wrote the following in an article entitled "What is Marketing?":

"The size and strength of your market is nothing more and nothing less than what you choose to make it. Success in this respect depends on your ability to anticipate the wants of buyers, packers, processors and consumers for both product and services to anticipate your competitors' actions and to play the game within the rules prescribed by government."

The key here is that you make your market. Yes, there will be a certain demand for many of our products such as sweet corn but you need to have the buyer choose your sweet corn. How do you do this? Marketing.

Max Brunk writes further: "People want and can eat just so much food. When this basic need is met they begin to search for better qualities

and more services—marketing services."

Note that one item mentioned here is better qualities. There are many dozen ears of sweet corn sold in the county and I know that there are many levels of quality within those ears.

What are you doing to insure the highest quality possible in your produce? Buyers, whether at a roadside stand, auction or wholesale operation will seek the highest quality possible. Your goal needs to be to provide the highest quality fruits and vegetables that can be produced.

If you are in a situation where you can directly market your produce then you have greater control over prices received.

Brunk noted: "Marketing and selling are not synonymous. To sell means to get rid of—to transfer ownership. Anybody can do that. On the other hand, to market means to create value—to perform a service for which someone is willing to pay—to perform a service on which a profit can be made."

If you sell at the auction or to a wholesaler you can improve your returns somewhat by having higher quality but you are still going to be subject to the prices of the market. Anyone who has received \$2 for his or her tomatoes at the auction in August knows what I mean.

On the other hand, by direct marketing you have more influence over the prices received for your produce. This does not mean that you will not need to be aware of the current market prices, but you can still have

a greater return as long as you give your customers a reason to pay these higher prices.

Tree-ripened fruit, vine-ripened tomatoes, heirloom tomatoes, fresh cut flowers or melons fresh from the field are items that you can provide at a level of quality and freshness that the chain stores could only hope to have. And consumers are often willing to pay a reasonable premium for this improved quality.

Max Brunk also mentioned creating services as part of marketing. What are these services? This could include having preparation information or recipes for your produce. Or this could include educating your customers about the unusual types of melons you are growing or the nutritional values of the various fruits and vegetables at your stand.

Another possibility would be to have prepacked and prepriced produce for convenience. The list here is very long and mostly limited by what you will do. Once a customer is in your market there are many factors affecting purchases. The way produce is displayed and located in your market will affect sales.

One suggestion I recently read was to have high-volume products such as sweet corn in more than one location or accessible from two sides so more people can be making selections at a time. Key items in your stand should have a consistent location so customers can find them each week. Also high-volume items should be located at the back of the stand so customers will walk by other items and possibly add them to their purchase. Color is also important in your displays. Break-up greens with reds or yellows. Also be careful with colors in displays of spring bedding plants. Finally always use the appropriate size container for the volume of produce being dis-

played. The last few green beans in the bottom of a large box look like leftovers and will not sell as well as the same volume of beans that appear to partially fill a smaller box.

Another form of direct marketing that is often overlooked is direct marketing to restaurants. Here you can receive premium prices for high quality produce but you will need to have the specialty items required by the chefs. A long-term relationship will help you anticipate required volumes and types of produce needed throughout the season. A steady supply and consistent quality is critical in this marketing method and you may need to supply many restaurants in order to be profitable. This marketing method is definitely not for everyone but if you can make it work for your operation then it can be an excellent source of income.

But what if direct marketing is not for you? You must then find ways to receive the highest possible prices for your produce. The quality of your fruits and vegetables will be the first determining factor in price. There are growers that always command a premium price at the auctions because their produce has the reputation of being of highest quality. There should be no reason that any other grower could match their quality. If they are growing too many types of vegetables to really produce a high quality product in any one item then perhaps you should reduce your variety and do a better job with

fewer items. It will take some time to develop the reputation for high quality but buyers remember where they purchased a quality product and will begin to seek your produce.

Dealing with the wholesale market has advantages and disadvantages as well. You generally deal with fewer people (good if you do not like to deal with many customers) but you will also need larger volumes of produce and almost always have to have a consistent supply. You will again be subject to market pricing but a premium product may again command a slightly higher price. With so many roadside stands and the volume of fruits and vegetables at the auctions I feel that more growers are going to have to start moving produce out of the county by wholesaling in order to receive high enough prices to stay in business. Look at what overproduction has done to milk prices. I hope the high production potential of Lancaster County does not do the same to fruit and vegetable prices locally.

Making a decent living by producing fruits and vegetables is becoming more of a challenge every day. Like with most other businesses there are many competitors out there trying for the same dollars as you are. I feel that there are still opportunities for the grower who takes the time to grow the highest quality fruits and vegetables and then takes some time to market them as well. Take the time now to do some planning in order to be successful this growing season.



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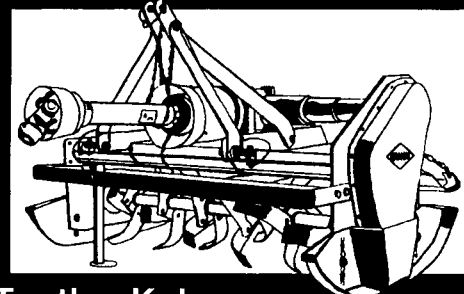


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