

# The Farmstand: Direct Marketing Tips



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that should be considered by direct marketers trying this approach.

First, the most important issue they found was that it was critical to cultivate a strong, positive relationship with the district people that were doing the buying. Often this is mistakenly assumed to be the cafeteria supervisor. Most often, local buying decisions are made by the school food service director that has jurisdiction over all the schools in the district.

You need to find this key person and initiate the relationship. If you start by convincing your neighbor, which happens to be on the school board, and they strong arm the food director, you might get the initial sale but will quickly learn that "something is wrong" with your product and they are no longer interested in a purchase the next time you show up. This person will make you or break you, so work to get it right and build a sense of trust with them over time.

And don't make the second mistake by starting with the largest school district first. This is a whole new approach for you. If you start with the smallest district, gain valuable expertise, and make a fatal error, all is not lost. There are larger districts you can still go after.

Second, provide what they want. Seems simple enough, but do you know what that is? Many districts print their menus in the local paper or post them on their Websites. Look them over to find places where you could offer products to be direct substitutes for what they are already using. Or maybe you could offer others that they aren't using yet.

And by all means think value-added. If you can offer a product that saves them time, effort, cost, or has more customer appeal, you will go a long way toward developing a new, long-term buyer. Just because you have apples to sell and they're local doesn't mean

they are going to be interested. They already get apples in #10 cans off a truck, delivered twice a week.

What can you offer to entice the purchase? Semi-prepared apple products, sauce, or prebaked items? Or maybe dried apple snacks? Be creative and don't overlook the nutritional angle.

You might even be able to enlist the help of a local nutritionist to develop proposed menu changes and the benefit to the kids. But don't overlook food safety concerns in value-added products and that is another area where the nutritionist can help.

Third, think quality! This is no place to get rid of lesser grades of your product. The director knows what top quality looks like and will expect no less from you. If you make a delivery and get a call about a quality related issue, quickly replace it with a no-questions-asked policy. And be on time with deliveries — your competition was and you'll be expected to do the same. Know going into the situation what the minimum is you are willing to deliver and the maximum you're able to produce.

This is another good reason to start small. And keep in mind this is mainstream. Organic is probably not going to get you a premium like it would at the growers' market in the nearby town.

The bottom line is there could be a good bottom line here if you learn to work the system and make calculated expansions over time. Explore all the facility possibilities in your area and carefully consider if you have the people skills needed to nurture sales with institutions.

You can receive the in-depth information on Dan Schofer's project by calling him at (202) 690-1170 and asking for his publication titled, "Innovative Marketing Opportunities for Small Farmers: Local Schools as Customers" and "How Local Farmers and School Food Service Buyers Are Building Alliances."

He also has a number of related publications on the project that have a wealth of great tips on the subject. All the publications are free and worth reading.

### Customer Service — A Quick Refresher

Good customer service is the difference between having a customer once and having a customer forever. Since you want to be in the latter category, you need to train those new employees you're getting this season on the needs and desires of your clientele.

Never lose sight of the fact that your sales team is an extension of you and generally will be the face of your business the customers remember. Teach your staff they are not just there to take up floor space, they are there to sell and cater to the range of cus-

tomers you typically have. They need to realize they are the key ingredients to make your business a success and ultimately their own employment rewarding and sustainable (i.e. a job next year!). They shape your image with the customer that directly influences sales.

Customer service is giving the customer what they want, when and how they want it, and in such a manner they will pay a premium for it. Staff always need to be reminded of the value the customer plays in the equation. They also need to know that 60 percent of customers polled annually complain about the service they receive. Well, this is a refresher, so how about a few quick points to review:

1. Smile and be friendly.
2. First impressions are

made in the first 10 seconds and influences most buying decisions.

3. Perception is reality and it's the customer's perception that matters.

4. Quality, consistency, courteousness, and willingness to listen always count.

5. Customer distress or uneasiness needs to be observed and corrected quickly.

6. Good attitude + good impression = repeat business.

7. Angry customers tell 20 others, resolve issues before they leave store.

8. Dialogues with customers and quickly call them by name after learning it.

9. Surprise the customer by meeting their expectations plus offering something extra.

10. Did I mention smile!

— Thomas B. Murphy  
Extension Agent



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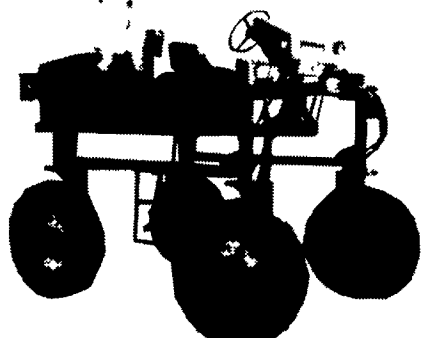
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