

## The Farmstand: Direct Marketing Tips

### A BOOK AND ITS COVER

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It's been said for generations that "you can't judge a book by its cover." Yet we all know that as people, we don't subscribe very well to the adage.

In a very literal way, when people walk through a video store looking for some evening entertainment, it's the covers attracting attention and getting the customer to make many of the selections that they do. In a more abstract sense, choosing a spouse is often initiated on "cover" preferences. (Better stop with that one right there!) So what does this have to do with marketing, anyway?

Well, people are no different about those choices, then they are about the choices they make purchasing something from you. In the movie example, the relationship people build with the store is the most important part of the equation. They may hate the movie they took home and may tell all their friends how bad it was, but it's likely that they will never mention the store they rented it at because it's not a factor.

Five stores in town carry the same movie and everyone knows it. The relationship patrons have with the video store and its product line is fleeting at best.

If the store is clean, bright, organized, upbeat, convenient, and carries ample copies of the latest movies, then the customer is generally satisfied. In this case, the customer's short-term expectations are that the product will be very different every time he goes

back. Chances are that in the direct marketing of products which you either raise or produce, you're looking for a relationship that goes deeper than the cover. You know, like selecting the right spouse, the cover will age over time and the relationship you develop is what will carry you.

Cultivating a long-term friendship built on trust between you and your customers is what makes for a successful direct marketer. It is also the area of your business where you spend a great deal of time working on qualities such as superior customer service, fair pricing, wide selection of items, a reasonable return policy, and others. And, although this is the most important part of the marketing puzzle and the part which will give you growth in the long run, the cover is still very important.

So let's talk about that for a moment. Growth means new customers and they have to be attracted in your direction. What is your business "cover" and how does the customer see it?

Sometimes the simple things are important in the customer's eye. This past Christmas, it was pointed out to me by a group of shoppers of how they liked the bags and boxes they got at selected stores. What they had inside of them would ultimately be more important, but the package left an impression in their minds that could carry to the next time they needed to make a shopping preference.

As a marketer, you're trying to

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# Dewy Meadows Maple Farm

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Onlookers could also watch as farm owner Andrew Dewing used a portable sawmill to slice through a 126-year-old maple tree that had been tapped for more than 75 years.

"A lot of people ask if tapping hurts the tree. When we sawed the boards off, you could see where the tree closes off the hole where the tap goes in. Tapping also left streaks on the lumber," said Dewing.

So much of the production of maple syrup begins with taking care of the tree. When tapping, the Dewings follow strict guidelines related to the diameter of the tree and number of taps on a tree. In an effort to improve their stand, the Dewings have been actively working with a state forester.

"The sugar is made in the leaf, so if a tree has more leaves, it will have a sap with a higher sugar content. As we're developing the woodlot, we're thinning more than you would if you were thinning for log production. We want to open up the woodlot and get branches to grow all down the tree," said Dewing.

On average, it takes between 40-50 gallons of sap to produce a gallon of syrup. The higher the sugar content, the lower the ratio.

"Our goal is to get it below 40," said Dewing.

Usually the sap is only about 2 percent sugar. Through the evaporation process, the water is removed until the syrup reaches just the right stage. It is then drained out of the evaporator and bottled for retail sale.

"The sugar we're taking from the tree this spring was made last summer," said Dewing. "The sugar content was a lot higher because we had a lot of sunshine. If you get a summer with a lot of



**Sugar on snow is a special treat. Here Alaina Dewing takes a taste of the sweet taffy.**

cloudy rainy days, the opposite is true. This year we had several runs over three percent sugar."

Andrew Dewing, his wife Sally and their family have hosted tours to their farm for at least five years, but their tradition of tapping maple trees dates back to an earlier time.

"My grandfather tapped trees and made syrup. He had a sugarcane in the woods, but it burned (down) when Dad was a boy. After that, we just made enough to use ourselves with an open pan evaporator. In 1979 we sold some timber and decided to invest the money in the syrup business. We built the sugarhouse in the fall of 1979 and 1980 was the first year we made syrup on a commercial basis," said Dewing. "We started with 1,000 taps."

Although Andrew and Sally worked in partnership with his mother and father, the syrup business was largely their undertaking.

"We were looking for another source of income. It's something we'd always made and I really loved making it," said Dewing.

Three years ago, another partnership was formed with two of the Dewings' sons and their families. Matthew, his wife, Janet, and children Alaina, age 7, Grace, age 5, Ellie, age 3 and Gram, age 1, along with Nate, his wife, Delphine, and children Mikayla, age 4 and Jehiel, age 2, joined in the sweet industry.

At that time, they upgraded their equipment and started tapping a 35-acre plot that they had been developing for the last 20 years. They can put out up to 4,000 taps on their 350 wooded acres.

"We knew we'd be making

more syrup. Our deal is that once the taxes and bills are paid, we split the profits in thirds. That's their incentive to sell syrup," said Dewing of the partnership.

Besides the physical labor of tapping trees, collecting and boiling sap and cutting firewood, each partner takes a turn manning trade show booths and selling the product from the farm. Nate has also developed a Website where syrup, maple products, and gift baskets can be purchased directly.

Products are also available at the farm year-round. The gift baskets were developed by Janet and Delphine and have been a hit at local craft fairs.

In all, the collection and production lasts only a few short weeks.

Freezing nights and warm, sunny days cause pressure to build up in the trees producing the best sap runs. But, as soon as the trees begin to bud, the trees stop making sugar and the sap changes from sweet to almost bitter. That's when production comes to a halt.

"We're open all year selling products," said Dewing. "But some people don't really have a concept of the production. If we say we're out of a particular thing, they'll ask if we will make more soon." Another son, Joel, chose not to be an active part of the maple business.

He has, however, continued the family's love of wood by constructing a home built entirely of products found on the farm.

"He used the old post and beam construction. From the hardwood floors to the siding to the posts and beams, everything was cut on the farm, sawn on the farm, and finished right here. When he cut all the beams and put the notches in them, I wasn't sure if it would all fit, but we put it up in a day, and it all fit!" Dewing said.

Much of the work for the home was done in woodshop carved out of a dairy barn. The old haymow is now half full of lumber while the other half still holds enough hay to winter several beef cattle.

"We had a dairy farm and we sold the cows about six years ago. The beef cows occupy the old heifer barn and dry cow pasture. We're in the process of changing to all Angus beef cattle. I bought eight Angus bred heifers last fall. Right now, I call it my motley crew. I even have a Scottish Highlander."

Life on this Century Farm couldn't be busier, but the family knows that the work they do now will reap sweet rewards later.

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