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## **Maple Weekend: An Educational Event That Has Built a Retail Market Expansion**

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A 2009 Cornell survey of food and beverage processors in New York State posed a question to the industry, “Are you currently engaged in any collaborative activities to help you compete more effectively in the market?” And, “How important would you rate various types of collaborations?” Maple processors were among those surveyed. Among various types of collaborations, including group purchasing to reduce expenses, shared services, legislative lobbying, workforce development, distribution and transportation, and marketing and promotion, the one most frequently used by maple respondents, 49.4% of them, was marketing and promotion activities. And on a scale of 1 to 4, marketing and promotion received the highest mean rating of 3.04, between valuable and extremely valuable. An event called Maple Weekend has become a very successful marketing and promotion activity. Its story may help others learn from the maple producers’ experience.

In 1996, the Wyoming County Maple Producers Association decided to try a new approach to educating the public about maple production. Up until then, individual maple producers held their own open house. Now, they would invite the public to visit participating sugar houses on one single day for a unified maple education day. Participants agreed to be open for the same hours, be boiling maple syrup, and offer a variety of learning activities and demonstrations that would be of interest to visitors. Importantly, they would pool funds to gain extensive advertising and promotion. Finally, they would offer interviews, stories and demonstrations to newspapers, radio and television.

In that first year, 12 maple producers participated under the promotional title of Maple Sunday. Hundreds of people visited one or more of the participants’ sugar houses. Although sales were not to be the primary focus, producers discovered that an educated visitor wanted to purchase products. In 1998, with just two “Maple Sundays” under their belt, the number of participants had grown to 22 sugar houses and the geographical area had expanded outside of Wyoming County.

As a group, these producers were able to access some important help with promotion. They obtained promotion assistance and grant funds for the special event from several county tourism departments, plus the event was listed in public sources, such as tourism, Cooperative Extension, and I Love NY web pages. The number of visitors increased into the thousands. Many of the sugar houses were expanding the event and opening on Saturday as well as Sunday.

By the 6<sup>th</sup> year, 2001, the Western New York Maple Producers Association, a regional arm of the New York State Maple Producers Association, took oversight of Maple Sunday. Participation expanded, attendance grew rapidly, and media were constantly circulating stories and demonstrations that vastly expanded its popularity. A Maple Sunday webpage was added to provide the public with ready access to the list of available sugar houses, directions, listings of activities and products available at each site. Sales on the weekend were significant with some smaller maple producers claiming to sell their whole crop. The key element to this growth was the cooperation and effort from all the participants.

As much as the group loved the marketing name Maple Sunday, Saturday attendance had surpassed Sunday, so the title Maple Weekend was adopted. A side business was also developing in the communities near concentrations of maple producers. By 2003, six other groups including fire stations and boy scouts were holding pancake breakfasts to feed the groups of visitors coming into the rural area to visit the sugarhouses. While a few sugar houses were holding breakfasts, most did not have the facilities to add this feature. Each of the peripheral groups contributed to the cause by adding their own level of promotion and advertising.

In 2004, the program was expanded state wide and coordination passed to the New York State Maple Producers Association. Participation grew to 76 sugar houses. A survey of participants following the 2004 Maple Weekend found over 45,000 people visited a sugarhouse on that weekend which generated about \$250,000 in retail sales for participating maple producers—about 5% of the value of the whole New York State maple crop.

Since 2004 participation has grown to over 120 sugar houses, and attendance and sales continue to grow. The program has expanded to two weekends so producers have the option of participating in one or both of the weekends that are promoted.

What could we learn from this? First, good education can increase sales. If the focus of maple weekend was just sales it would have been a flop. Getting to see syrup being boiled, visiting the woods, tasting a fresh maple confection, and tapping a tree are what compel people to come. Most importantly, people meet the farmer who actually makes some of their food.

Second, cooperation and dedication have taken the hard work of individual farms and multiplied them exponentially to form a prominent event. In turn, media has collaborated with farms, conducting interviews, scheduling cooking demonstrations, and promoting maple weekend. Sometimes, the offers from media have overwhelmed producers acting as regional contacts. In addition, tourism departments have been very willing to work with the organizers when they might not have been able to justify working with a single farm.

A willingness to change has allowed the program to expand and grow larger than its origin would have allowed. The willingness of the original maple producers to relinquish control and hand over the program to the larger associations, change the name, and expand the schedule showed forward thinking on the part of participants.

Is this kind of promotion for everyone? There have been a number of producers who have dropped out along the way. Some discovered that they didn't have the best location or facilities to handle the volume of visitors and stopped because they were over whelmed by it. Others were not able to recruit the help necessary to deal with crowds. Other producers have accommodated change and added parking and recruited new organizations to help on the weekend. All participants must be careful not to forget the founding goal of putting a high priority on education. People like to learn about farms in a fun and interesting setting.

Through the collaboration of Maple Weekend, many producers have developed a long-term market relationship with visitors who liked what they saw and liked what they tasted. Sales on the special day are just part of the overall, year-long business that can be generated by such an event.

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**“Smart Marketing”** is a marketing newsletter for extension publication in local newsletters and for placement in local media. It reviews elements critical to successful marketing in the food and agricultural industry.

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