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Farm Direct Marketers Should Band Together

by

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Today's sunshine and warmer weather offer a glimpse into this year's spring. What comes to mind are images of the activity on farms—preparing the land for planting, discussing what new varieties to try, ordering all the inputs necessary, making plans for opening day at the roadside stand, and countless other activities that nourish the farmers' spirit. Conversely, and speaking as a marketer, the important spirit in need of nourishment is that of consumers of fresh produce -- nourishment in the sense of feeding the spirit to prevent it from losing its future appetite for direct farm fresh produce.

Farmers with direct market outlets still have the advantage of selling "farm-fresh" produce. I say still, because supermarkets are and will continue to provide their customers with as fresh a product as they can. Some are doing a very good job. In addition, there are some reports indicating that backyard gardening is becoming more popular. What is difficult to ascertain is whether the popularity is rooted in recessionary times or in aging baby boomers who are taking to the hobby of gardening. The important issue for farm direct marketers is whether these developments will lead to increased or decreased demand for their product.

Though most owner/operators of farm direct marketing outlets think that marketing is an individual firm endeavor, it is important to keep in mind the generic perception the clientele has of farm direct marketing operations. No doubt, each firm's marketing efforts should take first priority, but the time may have come for some broader efforts. In addition to promoting the

individual firm and its products, some resources should be allocated to how each firm plays a role in marketing the idea, the experience, the concept, or whatever one thinks drives most people to value patronizing farm direct market outlets. The question is how to go about contributing to such generic promotion. It is not easy. The challenge is to develop an entity to serve as a catalyst for forming an organization to serve as industry spokesperson. Unfortunately, most individuals already have enough responsibilities that they can ill afford allocating time to an effort that may have little or no return to their personal enterprise.

Initially the catalyst need not be a large effort. It can be a county-level effort, such as the one developed in Dutchess County, or a regional effort, such as the North Country program. In time some pooling of resources will become more evident and attractive and thereafter a state-wide industry organization may emerge. This process can be facilitated by some public entity, but the thrust needs to come from the industry itself.

Will the future of farm direct marketing wilt away if the above is not accomplished? Of course not, but a more appropriate question is how much larger can the industry become. In addition, the side benefits of having contact with an ever increasing group of urban consumers will reap future profits--both monetary as well as intangibles--for an industry poised for growth. The growth will come in direct proportion to how well the consumers' fresh produce spirit is nourished by a concerned industry.