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## **Small Farm Businesses Can Compete with the Big Guys**

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It seems like the big guys just keep getting bigger, and fewer, doesn't it? Farms, supermarkets, department stores -- they're all gobbling up competitors in the Battle of the Mass Marketplace. At the same time, though, an amazing number of innovative small businesses are sprouting and flourishing, many on farms. How do they succeed?

The answer is marketing. A small or new business can't go head-to-head with the giants - - certainly not on price or volume. The operator of the small business must stay OUT of the Battle of the Mass Marketplace, and concentrate on a few key things that set it apart from the big guys.

There are three key areas where small businesses can often out-perform larger companies: quality, uniqueness, and customer service. No matter what kind of farm-based business you have -- retail or wholesale, product- or service-based -- it pays to excel in these three areas.

The importance of quality is obvious, especially when your competitors have price, convenience, and product diversity on their side. But your uniqueness is something you may not be fully exploiting. Do you know what sets you apart from your competition? Do you understand all those intangible factors that prompt customers to seek out your product or service?

Recently I asked an operator of a roadside fruit market what his customers come to him for. "Apples!" he said. But he was probably only partly right. I'll bet his customers are coming

for much more than just apples. They're coming for fresh air, a country experience, friendly service, and maybe a chance to hob-knob with the experts and ask for advice on caring for the two apple trees in the backyard. For many, buying apples is simply an excuse for an enjoyable family outing.

Successful marketers know that the quality of these other factors needs just as much attention as the quality of the apples. This is especially true of the "personal touch" service aspects of the business. Lots of people are willing to pay a little extra or drive a little farther if they feel they have a personal relationship with your business and can count on service that's friendly, polite, knowledgeable, and honest.

Excellent customer service goes hand-in-hand with understanding what your customers want and expect from your business. If you don't already have a good feel for what makes your customers tick, find out. Cultivate your sensitivity to the everyday feedback they give you. A customer survey can also help. You might start with an upbeat pitch like "Help us do a better job," and then ask for feedback on your services, product line, facilities, sales staff, how you compare to the competition, and so on. If your customers are wholesale buyers, make sure you have frequent contact and encourage their feedback at every opportunity.

Maintaining high quality, building on your uniqueness, and providing excellent customer service are three keys to beating out the big guys. These take time, energy, and creativity, but you can bet they are worth the investment.