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## **Reputation as Your Brand**

by

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Many marketers of agricultural products are small businesses owned by individual producers or entrepreneurs. Customers typically associate the products marketed or services delivered with an individual or small group of people. Their individual or group reputation can become a key reason for doing business with them. And so their own names become, in many ways, the “Brand” for their products.

Most small businesses have limited resources to promote and build a brand name. But given that your reputation can be a key element of your brand identity, it is worth giving some thought to how your customers view your reputation. This becomes more important for food marketers operating in small or local markets resulting in a “small world” of contacts and relationships. Word can travel fast about transactions that didn’t turn out well for buyers. Reputations can be quickly enhanced or tarnished in markets with a small number of players. This market reality creates both challenges and opportunities. Your positive reputation can give you a competitive advantage over those seen in a less positive light.

In fact, more publicly-traded firms are reviewing strategies to build their “reputational capital”. With the recent flurry of ethical breakdowns of firms like Enron, Tyco, or World Com, companies are realizing that building reputational capital can result in improved investor or

lender relations as well as creating a more positive work environment for managers and employees.

Small businesses with limited resources for conventional approaches to building a brand name like promotion and advertising might give some thought to relatively low-cost approaches to building your reputation. A starting point can be gaining a better understanding of how your customers view your reputation. Do your customers view you and your employees as conducting business in an honest and ethical way? Are you reliable and consistent in delivering the services or products that you market? How do you address complaints from customers about not being treated fairly? When customers think about your business, would the words “dependable”, “sincere”, or “trustworthy” come to mind?

Some strategies to consider when building or maintaining a positive reputation:

- When conducting customer surveys, incorporate a question or two about how they perceive your reputation.
- Develop a values statement for your business that all staff understand.
- Set and practice high standards for ethical behavior.
- Establish fair terms of trade that are transparent and understood by your customers to minimize misunderstanding.
- Gain a better understanding of business practices that might have a negative impact on your reputation.

Your reputation is an integral part of the “story” that you tell to customers or consumers. Some segments of consumers are very interested in how you produce a product or the values you adhere to in conducting business. Some examples include: the ethical treatment of animals, utilizing environmentally sound practices, or how employees are treated. Highlighting your reputation or the standards you set for conducting business can be a productive marketing strategy

In many situations, there are relatively low-cost, effective ways to build your reputation that can add value to your brand. Being perceived as a reliable, trustworthy business that treats customers fairly can yield increased sales as well as a more fulfilling work environment for you or your employees. Nice guys may indeed finish first as smart marketers!

**"Smart Marketing"** is a monthly marketing newsletter for extension publication in local newsletters and for placement in local media. It reviews the elements critical to successful marketing in the food and agricultural industry. Articles are written by faculty members in the Department of Applied Economics and Management at Cornell University.

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