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BUY-LOCAL Marketing Programs Taking Root in New York

by

Duncan Hilchey, Senior Extension Associate
Farming Alternatives Program, Cornell University

The phrase "Buy Local" is beginning to ring loudly around the state and the Northeast. Once the slogan of direct marketers and small growers, "buy local" is becoming a maxim of big business, including larger commercial growers, supermarket chains, and state departments of agriculture.

Massachusetts, for example, recently made funds available to support the establishment of regional agriculture marketing campaigns in that state. Here in New York, meanwhile, county-level Cornell Cooperative Extension field staff have been hatching their own fledgling efforts, such as "Hudson Valley Harvest," "Finger Lakes Culinary Bounty" and "Our Lakes Make it Local."

NY Farms! -- a statewide consortium of agricultural organizations -- has provided seed money for a number of these initiatives around the state, and has plans to provide ongoing financial and educational resources.

The buy-local concept, has been around for many years -- typically an informal seasonal effort initiated by an individual grower, a farmers' market, or a grocery store. Over the last decade numerous states also have established campaigns to promote their fruit and vegetable industries such as "Jersey Fresh," "Massachusetts Grown and Fresher," and our own "Pride of New York," which have had an impact.

This new wave of buy-local marketing campaigns includes:

- an array of increasingly sophisticated strategies being employed to promote local agriculture and the community,
- a surprisingly broad spectrum of organizational involvement in the communities, and
- a trend toward public financial support of these campaigns.

The driving force behind these local marketing campaigns is essentially the same thing that the tourism industry discovered long ago. Our state is so diverse -- culturally, geographically, and demographically -- that a growing number of communities want to capitalize on their unique differences.

The concept is that place names such as Adirondack, Finger Lakes, Niagara, Catskills, Mohawk, and Long Island have more value in terms of agriculture and food products in certain markets (especially within the state) than do the words "New York" alone. This does not negate the value of our Pride of New York program, which can generate value within the state and elsewhere.

Benefits to Growers

The bottom-line benefit of a buy-local campaign is market exposure -- potentially leading to increased sales and profit. The new buy-local campaigns generally have a long-term view. Individual growers can spread out marketing costs over a larger group of growers participating in the campaign.

Other benefits to the grower include the opportunity to contribute to consumer education about agriculture in general and about the farmers' specific product or commodity in particular, as well as the goodwill which being an active "local booster" in the community generates.

Examples of Innovative Buy-Local Marketing Strategies

The following are examples of some of the strategies that the new wave of buy-local campaigns are employing (beyond the usual point-of-purchase materials and marketing slogans):

- After market research suggested that consumers would respond to the idea of supporting local farmers, a Western Massachusetts group called Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA) rolled out its creative "Be A Local Hero" campaign. The underlying concept is to provide immediate positive reinforcement to those consumers who consciously choose to buy locally produced agricultural products.

- In response to the growing number of chefs interested in seasonal menus, the Finger Lakes Culinary Bounty has begun experimenting with "restaurant clusters," which are groups of farms, wineries, and restaurants working together to support their mutual interests. Some buy-local campaigns use a "food fax" in which a coordinator contacts local growers to find out what is ready in the fields, then faxes the consolidated information to potential buyers who then buy directly from farmers.
- Special events are also on the menu of some campaigns. Hudson Valley Harvest is planning a "Hudson Valley Can Do! Community Canning Festival," at which local volunteers will process tomatoes donated by area farmers into sixteen-ounce promotional jars of Hudson Valley Tomato Sauce. Their hope is to raise awareness of local farm and food processing products.
- The Select! Sonoma program in Sonoma County, California, has developed a set of trademarked logos for fresh agricultural products as well as for value-added products (Sonoma Made T and Sonoma Grown T). To be able to use the trademarked labels, farmers and processors in the county must certify that the products are, in large part, produced in Sonoma County. Through year-round marketing activities (especially in the nearby San Francisco Bay area) consumers are encouraged to look for products with these trademarked labels, and patronize local businesses which carry them.
- Finally, a number of buy-local campaigns are jumping on the "Dot-Com" bandwagon and developing Web sites, with links to Web pages of growers and food businesses. Announcements of events and about product availability keep program participants and local consumers informed about the campaign (see links below).

The Challenges

Naturally all of these activities come with a price, and as these campaigns grow and become more sophisticated, their staffing and financial needs commensurately increase. Even the most experienced programs struggle with funding and balancing the books. Sonoma County's annual budget of over \$150,000, for example, is barely enough to keep up with the growth of the program.

Fortunately, they have volunteers who put in extra hours to keep the program functioning year after year. About one-third of their budget comes from the 80 paying farm members of their

organization, while the remainder comes from associate memberships comprised of restaurants and food processors, and grants from foundations and other public sources. A budget of such magnitude would be difficult for most New York regions (let alone counties) to match.

Buy-local campaigns also need to do a better job of evaluating their marketing programs. Very few programs have done pre- and post-campaign consumer studies to help them "tweak" their strategies and determine where they can get the most bang for the buck. However, as public dollars are increasingly spent on these programs we are likely to see more accountability. The Department of Agriculture in Massachusetts is keen on seeing its buy-local initiatives evaluated.

Finally, multiple slogans and labels have the potential to create confusion in consumers' minds. It is quite possible that during the 2001 growing season some New York shoppers might see county, regional, and state marketing labels in a single grocery store or farmers' market. Is this really helpful? Is it overkill? This remains to be seen, but with leadership from New York's Department of Agriculture and Markets some creative multilevel integration of labels may take place in the near future, especially in the context of the department's current review of the Pride of New York campaign.

Summary

Buy-local (and statewide) marketing campaigns have the potential to offer an ongoing and cost-effective presence in the marketscape. Growers of fruits, vegetables, flowers, and other fresh and value-added products should consider participation in these programs as part of their overall marketing strategy. Even processors and their contract farmers should look into this growing opportunity that is taking root in New York and elsewhere in the Northeast.

Additional Contacts and Resources

For a list of existing and proposed "buy-local" campaigns mentioned in this article and others in New York State contact Duncan Hilchey at dlh3@cornell.edu or 607/255-4413).

Must See Websites

- Select! Sonoma

<http://www.sonomagrown.com/>

- PlacerGrown
<http://placergrown.qcmnet.com/>
- CISA Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture
<http://www.buylocalfood.com/>