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Year-Round Marketing of the Seasonal Agricultural Enterprise - *Should I or Shouldn't I?*

by

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The summer and fall growing/selling season is done, the holiday sales season is but a memory as well. So now it is time to tuck away the tools and stress from a hard season and take that well earned rest. Right? or **WRONG?** Ultimately, this is a personal and business-specific decision that you will determine for yourself. But to give you something to think about during your “down” time, we would like to offer some thoughts to consider as you look towards the next business cycle.

First, many if not all farm and agriculture related enterprises would classify their sales activities as having some type of seasonality. Of course, there may be a variation in the length and time of the season, but, nonetheless, all are faced with finding ways to entice their customers back to them year after year. It becomes more complicated since during the “off-season” the customer has been given sufficient time to become accustomed to making his/her purchases elsewhere.

To address this dilemma, there are generally two basic strategies employed in the agriculture sector. The first, used by many large agriculture producers in the “major” growing regions of the US, is to find a way to provide year-round products from a range of growing

regions or conditions. This can be in the form of protected production (i.e. hot house or greenhouse), or a more common approach, establishing a presence in other growing regions (i.e. the south, west, or overseas). In the case of very large producers, this is economically feasible and desirable due to efficiencies in modern large scale production and relatively low cost of transportation (although that card has been dealt a significant blow this past fall with the increase in fuel costs).

For smaller growers or growers who for whatever reason do not care to or cannot afford to pursue the last strategy, their option is to look for methods and techniques to bring the customer back each year when products become available. A fairly common approach employed by a significant number of small growers is to be passive about any marketing efforts until just prior to the start of the next harvest or the selling season. While this approach may have worked in the past, all signs indicate that the growing number of dual career families in the future results in a selling environment where people have less and less time available for errands and shopping. This comes at a time where there is increased competition for consumer dollars from a variety of industries each year. Consumers often do not have time to plan ahead and adjust their shopping habit to the seasonal schedule, or do not want to go through the trouble. Combining all of these factors, we see that customers will be more difficult to come by. So what can be done?

Industry statistics indicate that to retain one's past customers is a much more efficient use of time, effort and marketing dollars than working to establish or re-establish a new customer base each year. Admittedly, this is easy to say, yet difficult to do when a business is not open, or does not have products to sell during part of the year.

To begin working towards resolving this dilemma, the first step is to take stock of the resources a business has to work with. We would offer that a solid first step is to realize that a primary reason many people shop at smaller businesses is due to emotional, social, and environmental attributes not found at larger "big box" type outlets. These consumers are buying based on "VALUE" (see the August 2004 Smart Marketing article for insights into determining value). To keep the demand for your closed business means that you must keep your business's name and value proposition front and center in the consumer's mind. You will know you have succeeded when the customer sees or thinks of your business during the off-season and pines for the next season when they can utilize your services again.

Some means to accomplish this would include generating creative and innovative points of contact during the off-selling season. What might this look like in real life? It can be simply summarized as any effort that focuses on the unique personality and characteristic of each specific business. A fruit grower might send a postcard with a picture of their orchard being pruned in the late winter. A vegetable grower might send a similar card showing the fields being plowed or tilled in the late fall or early spring. Essentially, creating some point of contact that provides a visual and ultimately mental connection to the agriculture operation that maintains the emotional bond enjoyed by the customer and keeps them looking forward to the experience again.

Regardless of the method or message chosen, the key is to determine what it is that makes your business special and memorable. Keep your presence in your customer's thoughts and plans. Give them a story to tell. Your assignment this month is to determine how you want to spend your marketing efforts and dollars. In part 2 of this article, we will look in more detail at some techniques to consider if it makes sense for you to market your business all year round.

"Smart Marketing" is a monthly marketing newsletter for extension publication in local newsletters and to place 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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