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Year-Round Marketing of the Seasonal Agriculture Enterprises - *Tips and Techniques*

by

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Well, here we are in the midst of the crazy midwinter conference season. Driving from one conference to another, you can spend a considerable amount of “windshield time” (a phrase meaning “non-productive time” in the world of sales) during this time of the year, and depending on your cell phone coverage and roads driven to meetings, you may have some time that you can’t be in the barn, in the field or on the phone. You can make those miles productive and work to your advantage by taking the time to discuss and brainstorm ideas with your business partners. As a follow-up to the January 2006 Smart Marketing article, the focus of this article is around some specific year-round marketing techniques, strategies and ideas for your farm that you can consider.

Keep in mind that good ideas do not necessarily have to be new. Very few true “NEW” ideas surface each year. Often a modification, improvement in delivery, or a little personalization of a strategy already in place can make it more effective for your particular business. The fact that these thoughts are discussed in this article means there could be more than one farm evaluating the same idea at the same time.

So, let’s begin with some ideas for:

Promotional Materials

- Select a format for your direct mailing or print materials so that they will be read. Regardless of method, technique, strategy or message chosen, take the time to personalize it and tie it to your business. For example, if you send a personalized greeting card during the winter holiday season, it will more likely be opened and not thrown out with the junk mail.
- Design the delivery schedule and promotional materials to be appropriate and timely. This means knowing when it is vacation season, shopping season, tax season. Think back to the exercise equipment flyers that you received right around the first of the year to help you work off those extra holiday pounds. During this time of year, consumers are tired of the cold and dreary winter so many sale ads are featuring spring merchandise to appeal to our emotional needs.
- Consider varying slightly the look of the marketing materials you use to avoid looking the same and being screened as repeats and thrown away. However, be careful with this technique as you don't want to confuse your image and message in your customer's mind.
- Utilize true greeting cards and have them mean something to your customer. You can send an anniversary card to your best customers on the date of their "first encounter" with your business and use your database to personalize it with the number of years they have been a customer. They will be surprised and delighted that you care enough about them to know these details.
- Remember that many of your customers shop your business for other than "buying something". Share your agricultural life with them. You can send out postcards showing the life you take for granted on your farm, such as beautiful orchard blooms, or you or your employees working hard plowing, pruning, planting, weeding, preparing for harvest, or cleaning up after the season. A dairy farm can show cows walking in fresh show, new "baby" cows, or a truck picking up milk for the processor. Don't forget to make it human. You can also show customers how they can enjoy your product just before your season starts as a means by which you invite them back for the year. It reminds them of the great times they had and gives them something to look forward to.

Off-Season Promotion

- Develop a portfolio of value-added products that your customer can use throughout the year. This will extend your season and get your name in front of your customers more often.
- Participate in activities in your community during the off-season, such as county/regional tourism meetings, spring home shows, events at malls during Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, etc.
- Find ways to use your space during off-season. Maybe someone will want to rent it for parties, corn roasts, etc. If you have a particularly scenic setting, consider hosting weddings and events.
- Collaborate with your neighbors. Organize a county-wide local food tasting involving farms throughout your county or region. This could be in partnership with the tourism agency that supports your region.
- Become a speaker for social organizations, such as boy/girl scout meetings, fraternal organizations (Lions, Rotary, etc.) and garden clubs. These groups meet regularly and want new topics. Once in the talk show circuit, you will become famous, and they will find you.

Creating Excitement and Teachable Moments

- Start a serial newsletter detailing stories of your operation, the history of the farm and family, and information about your products.
- Do educational events such as apple, strawberry or cheese tasting, and yes, you can do it with vegetables such as broccoli, carrots and lettuce. You know there are different varieties with different tastes but your customers may not. It doesn't have to be exotic, maybe just a "forgotten" fruit or vegetable, such as rutabagas, turnips, etc.
- Look for free or relatively low-cost press opportunities. In my home town region of Michigan, we always looked forward to an annual auction of the first flat of strawberries

for the year (it meant summer was here) by local farmers. The “first fruit” event doesn’t have to end in an auction. It could include presenting the flat or fruit to the oldest person living in the county, to the county executive, a government official, etc....you get the idea.

- There are always the tried and true school tours and educational events. If you have camps close by, they might be interested in having an agricultural component in their offerings. Experience has shown it could be very rewarding when you help to “turn on the light” for a young farmer to be!! Moreover, can anyone with kids say that they haven’t been heavily influenced by their kids when making some purchase decisions?
- Start a sign campaign by your fields explaining to those passing by what is happening in the fields during the growing season. Lots of people love the idea of farming, and you can help them tie themselves to agriculture. If you are using interesting harvest equipment, you might consider doing an event around it so customers can come and watch. Combining, potato digging and hay bailing can be very exiting for non-farm customers. Step outside yourself to see what others see and to see what you take for granted.
- Plant new or experimental crops/varieties and offer free tastings, or invite customers to stop in and monitor their progress with you.
- Cross-merchandise and market at other venues such as dig-your-own potatoes at pumpkin picking, u-pick fruit with spring lawn and garden sales, or Christmas tree operations with corn chowder tasting. This can be particularly effective if you have a neighbor who complements your operation. You both win.
- Participate in regional and statewide awareness programs that relate to your industry. One of the most successful exhibits at the Iowa State Fair included a pig birthing exhibit with a webcam that allowed the public to check in on the status of the mother-to-be and her piglets any time, day or night. Our local county fair has a cow birthing exhibit that has people running to see the magic event when word spreads around the grounds that the calf will make its appearance at any moment.

- Contests always seem to stir up excitement with customers, especially if they become personal and include their expertise such as a recipe contest where you can have customers take your product, make the recipe and bring it back for “judging”. Other fun events we have seen include cherry pit and watermelon seed spitting, pumpkin carving, corn shucking, and zucchini cannon ball.

Regardless of what you choose to try, there are some critical details to attend to; otherwise, your time, effort and money will be less effective. You need to keep your database up-to-date and accurate, and monitor and use the database regularly. Also, it is helpful to keep an historical database. Only sending material to last year’s customers means you are missing a significant number of customers from prior years. You can survey past customers who don’t come again to find out why they didn’t return. Maybe there is something you are missing when evaluating your business operations that could be improved upon.

Above all, try to look for individuals, other producers, small businesses or organizations with whom to collaborate as many of these activities as possible to avoid burning yourself out. And finally, it is more effective to be creative and not necessarily expensive. If you can use your marketing resources (time as well as money) well, you can spend more resources on fewer efforts to do them right, rather than developing a lot of less effective efforts.

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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