

Marketing Your Farm



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A good marketing plan is an essential element of a farming enterprise and should not be overlooked. Some would venture it ranks above production in importance, because a farm's profitability is greatly influenced by their ability to consistently sell product throughout the season for a good price. It can be tempting to start production without giving much thought to marketing or where product will be sold. However, planning for this in advance of harvest will help determine production levels and estimate income. Keep in mind that marketing is not simply about selling, but having a clear idea of who your customers are, what they want, and being able to deliver it to them for a profit.

A marketing plan for a farm should include promotion of your products as well as pricing, packaging, and distribution. It should also broadly define your customer or buyer, the values that drive their purchasing, and the most effective means of connecting with them.

If marketing is not your expertise try to identify others in your network to help. Many graphic designers are able to work with you on developing and implementing a marketing plan. ASAP's [Working with a Graphic Designer](#) resource can help you be prepared to make the best use of paid professional time.

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Written and compiled by ASAP staff. For more resources visit the resources section at asapconnections.org.

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Market It Local

The demand for locally grown farm products continues to grow on both the national and local level and there is evidence that consumers will show preference for, and pay more for, local products if you communicate its value. Surveys of consumers in WNC indicate the top reasons people give for wanting to buy locally grown farm products:

- To support local economy/community
- To have a meaningful connection with the people growing their food
- To have knowledge and trustworthy information about how their food is being grown
- For the qualities they believe local food has, e.g., freshness, better flavor, more nutrition, better for the environment.

Understanding the motivations and values behind local purchases offer you insight into the most effective tools for marketing your farm and its products.

Tell your story—Customer want to get to know you and your far, as well as, how their food is grown. Make it personal, customers want to know the story behind their food. Not only will this build your customer base, but it will add value to your product. [ASAP's Storytelling Toolkit](#) is a great resource for helping you craft and communicate your farm story.

Develop a farm identity and logo—Think about branding as a necessity and an asset—customers need to be able to easily identify your farm. Consistent imagery and messaging is critical to helping people remember your business and associate it with the values that drive their purchasing. ASAP's [Developing Your Farm Brand](#) offers tools and resources to help you through this process.

Label it local—Local labeling is essential when selling wholesale or to a third party, but also important to attracting new customers and reminding existing supporters that they are helping sustain local farms. In some cases local labeling may be the only way a customer knows your products were grown or raised here in the region. ASAP's Appalachian Grown program and branded materials can help you highlight your farm as authentically local.

Once you have jumped into crafting your farm story and developing a farm brand, there are a number of ways to use these tools to market your farm. As with any marketing effort it will take some combination of time and money, so it's important to be strategic about how and where you focus your resources. The following section discusses how to target your efforts and best practices for promoting your farm.



Focus your Efforts

The biggest marketing mistake many businesses make is trying to reach everyone with their message. Consumers are swamped with promotional messages in daily life and the default reaction to most advertising is to ignore it. Customers need to see or hear your message repeatedly to start to take notice, so unless you have a huge marketing budget and a full time person working on marketing, it is important to be strategic about where you focus your resources.

Building connections and relationships with your customers is the best way to optimize the potential of local markets. To begin this customer engagement process try to learn more about the values and characteristics of your customers and target your efforts on people that share those values and may have similar interests. Who will your farm story resonate with? Which audiences share your values and will be willing to invest in your story? Are there customers that have commonalities in daily routines or buying habits? This narrow focus is called a market share. To add to your market share it can be helpful to create a “persona,” or an imaginary person, who reflects characteristics and values of your customers. Focusing your marketing efforts on this persona, and ways to reach them throughout their daily life, will also reach other people like them—therein targeting your marketing.

Sample Persona

Let’s consider a hypothetical customer named Amanda. Amanda lives in Yancey County and works at the local hospital. She is married with two children in elementary school and her interests include cooking, outdoor recreation, and healthy living. Based on this broad information alone, you can identify a number of potential ways to reach Amanda and other customers like her. You could sponsor youth sports events, so she sees your logo while her children play. You could buy radio ads during the time she drives her kids to school, so she hears your message while in the car. You could advertise in *Blue Ridge Outdoors*, a free magazine for people interested in getting back to nature. You could leave rack cards about your farm offerings in the break room at the hospital or the community center that offers exercise classes. Your goal is to reach your audience in the places they’re already looking. Create your own sample persona of a target customer and brainstorm a list of places or media that may already be part of their daily life.



Partnerships

While you are targeting the customers you want to connect with, also think about beneficial partners that may also be trying to reach the same audience. Is there another business that serves the same customer in a complementary way? For example, maybe there is a local baker offering cooking classes and you could promote the class to your CSA members. The baker could feature ingredients from your farm in the class and/or offer a coupon for participants to visit you at the market. Look for partners that may have complementary skill sets, and may be genuinely excited about working together. You may be social media savvy and a potential partner may have a broad newsletter list. Partnerships need to be equitable and mutually beneficial, but developing trusted partnerships can be an effective way to spend your marketing time and money.

Master Your Message

A clear description of your target audience and a compelling picture of how you want them to view your farm products will help you develop a good marketing message. Frame your message to illustrate the benefits of your products or services, focusing on what your business means to them, not what it means to you— then, keep your messaging clear and concise.

Stay Consistent

Elements such as logos and taglines will help you stay consistent and help your target audience learn to recognize your brand while developing loyalty for your products. While customers may say that they heard about your business “from a friend,” that reference is often the last step of a chain reinforced by consistent messaging on signs, products, and media.

Say It Again

Repetition is key to getting your message across. A marketing rule of thumb states that people need to hear or see the same message three to five times before they consider taking action. If you choose to purchase print advertising, for example, it’s usually better to buy four quarter-page ads than a single one-page ad. Your efforts may not bring immediate results, so be persistent with whatever approach you choose.



Images Matter

Words can be the least important part of a marketing effort. Striking images and logos are what first attract the eyes of customers and reinforce your message visually. Be prepared to invest ongoing time in your business’s visuals. ASAP’s [Photography Tips for the Farm](#) provides basic advice on getting good images from your farm, but consider investing in professional help if you lack the time or vision to do so yourself.

Build a List

It is significantly easier to sell more to an existing customer, or get a referral from them, than it is to find a new one. Once you connect with a customer, don’t take them for granted. Creating and building your customer list gives you the opportunity to continue to connect with the customers you already have. Keep mailing list signup sheets readily available wherever you sell your products and prominently display links to online signup forms on your website and social media. Use email and mailing addresses to strategically stay in touch with your customer base and keep your farm at the front of their minds. Services for online newsletters include MailChimp, MyNewsletterBuilder, and Constant Contact.

Customers need compelling reasons to sign up for newsletters or follow you on social media. Offer special sales or advanced invites. Customers are looking for ways to feel connected with area farms— give them the opportunity.

Be selective with your direct mailings—once per month is a good newsletter frequency. Each mailing should offer some real value to subscribers, such as a special coupon, an exclusive opportunity to visit the farm, or a great recipe featuring your products. Make sure that your subscribers have opted into receiving your communications and that you provide an easy way to unsubscribe.

Where to Share

No matter where you share your story, it is important to focus on the quality of your presentation. While the authenticity of your voice is an asset, make sure it has a professional look. Investing in quality materials and implementing a few of these best practices will make sure it gets heard in the competitive media environment.

Print Materials

A few professionally produced print materials are often the best place for farms to start with marketing. Rack cards, flyers or business cards can be given to customers or strategically placed in locations your customers are likely to frequent. For example, health-conscious customers might spend time at area gyms or yoga studios, many of which have community bulletin boards. Those interested in organic growing practices might visit local co-ops or natural food stores, while people interested in local crafts might visit galleries and museums.

Unlike many other forms of communication, print advertisements are persistent—a reader will see an ad in a magazine or newspaper every time he or she flips through the pages. Because print ads can also be more expensive than other media, it's important to research publications thoroughly before committing to a purchase. Regional magazines and local newspapers exist for very specific interests, and their advertising rates are often less than mass market publications.

Earned Media

Earned media refers to press you don't have to pay for—the stories, articles, and interviews about your business that appear as content in news sources. These mentions are extremely valuable—they carry the authority of a trusted media source and give you the chance to tell your story in more detail. While earned media can be difficult to obtain, read more about steps to boost your chances in ASAP's [Storytelling Toolkit](#).

Press releases are the primary way to tell contacts in the media about news from your business. These short documents share the key facts of your news and should entice journalists and reporters to learn more. ASAP has created a simple resource, [Press Releases](#), that including guidelines and a template. You can also take more direct routes to earned media by writing your own letters to the editor and op-ed pieces about topics relevant to farming in the area.

Social Media

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat—"social media" is the collective term for these websites and applications. Unlike traditional media, where a single author or organization talks to a passive audience, social media serves as a place for public conversations between many users. ASAP's [Social Media Guide](#) provides a comprehensive overview of how farm businesses can best take advantage of these platforms.

The most important thing to remember about social media is that your business shares the same space as your customers' friends. Whatever you do must compete with the daily activities and interests of those personal networks. Instead of simply promoting your business, your goal on social media should be to build relationships and community, participating in conversations and sharing your status.

Many social media professionals recommend the 80-20 rule when posting: roughly 80% of your content should entertain or educate your customers, while only 20% or so should directly market your business. Applied to a farm, that 80% could include recipes for seasonal produce, attractive pictures, and short "day in the life" stories. The 20% of marketing content could include your presence at local farmers markets, CSA share availability, and new partnerships with restaurants or groceries.

Remember why people want to connect with your farm. This is a chance to help customers share in the story of your farm and the cycles of the seasons. Customers seeking out local food and farms are looking for authenticity, transparency, and the stories behind where their food comes from. Posts that offer insight into your growing practices, the amount of work that goes into farming, or a peek into your farm story are going to be engaging.

Conclusion

While marketing is often seen as just one more thing demanding your time and money, it is a critical piece of building and maintaining your farm business. Being strategic about your efforts and making a marketing plan will help you be as efficient as possible. Here are a few pieces to remember to include in your plan:

Spend some money—Invest in having a nice looking and consistent web presence and print materials, and/or regular ad placements.

Spend some time—Explore earned and social media, build a list, build on existing relationships.

Repetition—Try to reach the same person 3-5 times with a consistent message.

Be patient—This type of marketing is relationship-based and will take time to grow. Don't just try something once.

Remember your current customers—It is easier to increase sales to current customers than find new ones, so think about ways to build on existing relationships as well as create new ones.

ASAP offers one-on-one marketing support for farms in the Appalachian Grown region. For feedback or suggestions on your marketing plan contact ASAP by calling (828) 236-1282.