



The Branding Process: Best Practices for Local Food Brand Management

The goal of the local food branding process is to build the identity of your brand, to infuse it with the values you have defined, build trust in its authenticity, and build consumer demand. The process requires careful research and planning around both the product you aim to brand and the customers to whom you wish to market your brand. This guide is meant to provide a brief overview of the best practices for launching a brand and addresses the critical variables of brand development and management.

Considerations

Retailers in highly competitive industries reinvest up to 50 percent of their net revenue on marketing to maintain their presence in the marketplace. In order to position your local food brand strategically in the marketplace, you should first assess your capacity as an organization to promote and maintain the integrity of the brand in terms of the resources available to you - budget, staff, skills and expertise, software, partnerships - for example.

When it comes to branding, don't bite off more than you can chew. Inadequate resource investment is the best way to ensure that your brand will not get noticed. It is better to invest time and money into a single area of high opportunity than to spread resources too thin and lose the ability to make a strong impression.

The resources available to you will inform brand outreach methods and mediums, the materials you create, and the protocols you develop for maintaining your brand. Before starting a branding program you might ask yourself:

- What kind of resources do we have or can we reliably get?
- Do we have a solid base of producers and a means to connect with them about our branding program?
- Do we have the capacity to create promotional materials in house, e.g., do we have staff with graphic design skills and the software necessary to create materials?
- How will we ensure brand integrity?

- Do we have the capacity to conduct farm inspections or audit businesses' local food purchases?
- Who are our partners and how can we leverage those partnerships to build and promote the brand?
- Is everyone at the table that should be at the table in moving the brand forward?

Determine what you're branding

A successful branding process begins with a clear set of brand parameters and definitions:

- What is the geographic reach of your program?
- What are the criteria for farm participation?
- What are the criteria for business participation?
- Which categories of product can be labeled with your brand? (e.g., processed products, locally raised meats, prepared foods, etc.).
- Do these products need to meet additional harvest or production standards? (e.g., organic practices, humanely raised, etc.).

Engage brand stakeholders, e.g., farmers, food entrepreneurs, food industry buyers, in this formative process. This step will promote brand buy-in and identify potential issues with operationalizing the brand in the formative stages of the program. The *users* of the brand have a valuable perspective, distinct from brand managers, and will provide insight into potential issues with operationalizing the brand.

Position your brand

A local food brand is different from a retail product brand in that you are not selling a product; you're selling an idea about a product. The brand is a value statement about local food and its origin, and ultimately your local food brand is a label that allows food buyers and end consumers to act on their preference for local.

When developing a local food brand, it is critical to understand who your customers are and what they really want. A valuable step is consumer research. Conduct research in your region to understand how consumers define local, to identify the messages and values that resonate most with your target audience, and to determine the communications channels the use most often.

Another important piece of preliminary research involves identifying the presence of other local food brands in use, which may conflict with or detract from your brand. Multiple local food brands can create confusion in the marketplace. Your goal is to position your brand to differentiate the products you brand from all other products in the market, and you can only this with a distinctive campaign. Ask yourself:

- What other local food brands are in use in the region? What are their definitions?
- What distinguishes your brand from the others?

- How are the managers of these brands maintaining brand integrity? Are they backed by a certification process, for example?
- Are the managers of these brands (potential) partners or competitors?
- Can the brands work together through, for example, a co-branding effort?

Develop your brand identity

Think of brand identity as the public face of your local food marketing campaign. It is all of the things people will associate with your brand including your logos, pictures, and publications. Each component of your brand identity should capture the essence of the value of local food and appeal to people's emotions. Use the following questions to help you hone in on your brand identity:

- Why do you want to create a local food brand?
- What do you hope to achieve by branding local food and farm products?
- Why and how is your brand different from competitors?
- How can you communicate the values your brand embodies to customers?

Engage a core group of brand stakeholders - farmers, buyers, consumers, food entrepreneurs - to test the usability of your program, to identify and troubleshoot issues, and to gauge perceptions of program parameters.

Manage and promote your brand

Branding is all about creating demand for a product, and demand is created through targeted promotions and outreach. Partner with local media to deliver clear and consistent messaging that explains the benefits of the program. Marketing researchers estimate it takes an average of six exposures before a consumer responds to an advertisement. Therefore, your brand should focus on consistency and repetition so that the public is clear on what your brand is and what it means.

A brand name gains strength by being used consistently and frequently. Consider the following tips to increase the recognition and understanding of your brand in the marketplace:

- Use consistent rules for color and typography to reinforce the look, feel, and tone of your brand's messaging.
- Don't overcomplicate your messaging - keep it simple and consistent.
- Be sure that your program rules/parameters are clear and transparent.

It is important to make sure that when public promotion begins, there is identified product in the marketplace.

Promoting a product that doesn't exist is a fast way for your brand to lose credibility and trust. Consider producing a local food guide to let consumers know where they can find certified local food products.

Ensure user buy-in

Outreach and promotion of your local food brand to area producers and businesses is just as important as promotions to consumers. It will be up to you to show farmers and food buyers the importance of local food branding and the value that using your label will bring to their products. Strong demand for local food exists; let farmers and businesses know that their use of regional branding will give them a means to increase their marketing power and access consumers' desire to support local farms and the local economy.

Follow these best practices with farmers and businesses to effectively manage your local food brand in the marketplace and ensure user buy-in:

- Train farmers and businesses on how to use the brand accurately.
- Provide support and incentives to farmers and buyers to encourage the use of the brand - to both get the brand out in the marketplace and as a means to demonstrate the value of the brand to program stakeholders.
- To the degree possible, streamline the process for farmer and buyer participation in the program. You are not only establishing the value of the brand with end consumers, you are establishing its value with brand users - farmers and food industry stakeholders. While you are establishing the value of the brand with the users of the brand, you have to carefully mediate between holding users accountable to program definitions/parameters and making the program relatively easy to use.
- For retail and wholesale markets, focus branding efforts at the level of the farm. In other words, work with farms to get brand labels on products and packaging.



The fluidity of the produce market in particular challenges retailers' capacities to keep up with signage changes that reflect changes in product origins.

Monitor and evaluate your brand

Develop an information management system and strategy to monitor program participation. This will be important for keeping track of program participation and maintaining brand integrity. A strategy that builds in data collection will also provide you with a crucial means to evaluate the impacts of your program.

Evaluation is vital to understanding the impacts of your branding and certification program, determining future strategic action, demonstrating its value, and securing funding for future branding activities. Your program's monitoring system can track changes in your program (and in the local food economy) over time. Changes in the level of program participation, for example, provides a proxy for the perceived value of your program for farms and businesses. The diversification of participating business sectors and the diversification of farm product

offerings correlate with an expanding local food economy that provides increasing opportunities for farms and businesses.

Beyond the system you use to monitor program participation, surveys and/or interviews conducted regularly with program participants provides a means to measure the perceived impacts of your program on farmer and food businesses, track local food sales, and solicit participant feedback on program strengths and weaknesses. Consumer surveys administered at periodic intervals track changes in brand awareness and in the perceptions and values associated with local farms and food and your brand.

Regular collection of qualitative data from program participants through interviews/surveys or through more informal, ongoing methods will provide you with valuable information about how the program is working for participants and about emerging conditions that affect your program. Be prepared to adapt to shifting conditions and new information.

Summary of best practices

- Assess your resources and capacity to launch and maintain a brand.
- Engage brand stakeholders to help develop the parameters and definitions of your branding program.
- Conduct research to understand your market environment.
- Develop a distinctive and clear brand message.
- Use consistent graphics and language to promote your brand.
- Demonstrate the value of your brand to brand users and show them how to use it accurately and to their best advantage.
- Conduct ongoing evaluation of branding efforts to monitor participation and inform the continued development of the program.