

Telling Your Story to Sell Your Product

IN THE MARKET



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Direct market farmers have a unique opportunity to connect with their customers. Most people know this to be true, which is why farmers markets work well. This also explains the increasing demand for and establishment of community supported agriculture (CSA) farms around the country.

If you are new to marketing your product or if you feel you just aren't quite making the connections to the customer as well as you should, then read on. This article will examine some keys to marketing success for building and telling your story.

The suggestions and examples come from Margo Sue Bitner, who owns The Winery at Marjim Manor. If you have a product that can be sampled, like Margo has, then do so. However, before providing samples at a farmers market, you should check with the market manager as to whether samples are allowed at the market. Also, keep in mind food safety with any food product you are sampling, and take steps to ensure the safety and integrity of the product during sampling. If it is a product that people need to touch, try on, etc., provide them the opportunity to do so.

Make It Fun and Welcoming

While traveling in the car, I heard a radio ad for office furniture, where the store owner said, "I don't know how people can buy furniture without trying it out. I wouldn't buy a pair of shoes without walking in them, and you shouldn't buy a chair without sitting in it."

He, of course, followed this statement by inviting listeners to come to his store, feel the material, sit in the chair and write at the desk. It's a way to bring your customer into your place of business and make that personal connection with you.

With a product that is a food or beverage, this connection goes deeper with samples. Customers have the opportunity to see, smell and taste (and in the case of wine, sip) the sample. It is important to make this experience fun and welcoming for the customers. And the act of sampling gives you the opportunity to provide other information.

Recently, while visiting a local winery, I had the opportunity to sample a variety of different fruit wines. As I swirled the wine in the glass and inhaled the bouquet, the owner explained the blend of fruit used to make the wine, the flavor notes that I may detect and how to pair this wine with different meals. He shared all that information before I even took my first sip!

And as the wine crossed my lips and swirled around in my mouth, he gave me a moment to experience the burst of flavors and remember the past summer through the taste of the wine. He shared at that moment why the fruit in this region makes such quality wine. The result: I left with a bottle of

wine and a great experience.

Sell the Experience, not the Product

Likewise, visitors to The Winery at Marjim Manor who are taking part in the wine tasting get a lot more than just a sip of wine. Margo provides them with the winery's story, the history of the manor and family history, along with tips on how to taste the wine and information about fruit farming.

By offering all this information, Margo is providing her customers with a richer, fuller and more well-rounded experience beyond the wine. She is connecting them emotionally and intellectually to her business and her products. The result is that when the customer makes a purchase, they are getting more than just a great bottle of wine — they are getting a piece of history, agriculture and the wine!

Customer Education

Use the time you have with your customer to educate them about your products and farm. Everyone likes to feel smart and show off knowledge. A well-educated customer, who likes your product and feels a connection to your farm, is one of your best public relations people.

Even with all the advances in marketing, and the rise of using the Internet to market products, word of mouth is still the No. 1 way to connect and sell your product. Besides, social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) are simply online versions of word of mouth.

So take the time to provide the education to your customer. This doesn't have to be a lecture or a thesis. Remember the first two points: Make it fun and sell the experience. For example, if you have a product that you can demonstrate, such as basket weaving, you can show

your customer how to make a basket, while explaining different techniques of weaving, and how to care for the basket so it will last a long time.

Hire the Right People

Even the best product cannot sell itself; it needs people to move it out into the marketplace and connect with customers. If you aren't the marketer in your business, then you need to hire people who smile and are welcoming. Manners and attitude are intrinsic; skills can be taught.

It even comes across when answering the phone; you can hear a smile over the phone. When we are short staffed in the office, I will answer the phone on occasion. I have an "answering the phone voice" that apparently is different than my regular question-answering voice, since most people, even those who know me quite well, don't recognize me right off when I first pick up.

Think about the businesses that you frequent. Do the clerks greet you with a smile and "How are you today?" Do they send you off with, "Have a nice day!" Have you ever been someplace where you know right off that the people working there don't want to be there, and that they are putting in time and you are the last person they want to see today? How did you feel after visiting? Did you want to return?

Now apply all those questions to your business. The people you have on the front line of your business can make or break a sale. You already have the customer in the door; you want them to leave with something, and you want them to come back (hopefully with friends). Hiring the right people can help do this for you.

A Mix of Promotion:

This is a big one for me. I feel strongly that businesses need to use

a variety of methods to connect with their customers and use these to build the brand of their business. Create a blend of advertising, press releases and Internet that fits your market. It may take a while to get the correct mix for your business, but it will pay off in the end. Use your customers' visit to your farm or business to strengthen your connections.

If you were to visit The Winery at Marjim Manor, you would leave a pin in the map showing where you came from. The winery uses a number of different ways to connect with its customers, and if you would like to continue the connection you could sign up for an e-newsletter or snail mail, or follow them on Twitter and Facebook.

You would have learned something about the winery, the family history and fruit farming. Additionally you would have been entertained. Before leaving you could even pet the cat. All in all, you would have had a great experience to tell your friends about while you shared with them a glass of the wine you purchased.

So, if you are a direct market farmer seeking to strengthen your connection with your customers, remember these five keys to marketing success when people visit your farm:

- Make the experience fun and welcoming for the customer.
- Sell the experience, not the product.
- Educate your customer.
- Hire the right people.
- Create and use a mix of promotion.

And have fun doing it! Remember, if you enjoy what you do, it will show and others will enjoy the products you create.

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