



MARKETING AT THE MARKET?

Prepare for selling at a farmers market

By Cole Ehmke

Winter is a time to plan for the coming growing year. If one of your winter thoughts is about selling some of your acreage's produce at a farmers market, consider this advice from managers at some of Wyoming's 28 markets.

Set expectations. Begin with the end in mind – are you anticipating being a vendor as a one-year project for just a couple weeks in the summer, or could this be a project that could generate an expected amount of income? Thinking in advance about your commitment will help you make decisions, such as on what scale you want to produce.

Differentiate yourself. Will you provide a rare or unique product? Is the story of your operation interesting? Being a vendor involves competition at some level, and

there are a number of ways to compete. Some include price (low or high), quality (freshness), presentation (a booth that makes use of vertical space – stacked high or on shelves so things are easy to see), recipes, samples, and credence values (such as natural or organic production, or the history and story of your operation). As Ted Craig of the Wyoming Department of Agriculture notes, "Farmers markets are very much like any other marketing situation."

Some of Craig's insights on marketing include:

1. A local grower has an advantage over an out-of-state one.
2. Relationship marketing is key to long-term customers and getting the best prices. (See more on this insight below.)



3. How a vendor displays wares is extremely important to generate initial sales, so make sure produce or whatever you are going to sell is clean and nicely displayed.
4. Do your homework so you don't price your product too high or too low. This will vary over the season. The first vendor with local tomatoes and cucumbers can get much higher prices early on.

In general, don't set product prices too high or too low. Price is the easiest way to compete but perhaps not one of the most effective. Charge what the product is worth, and don't be afraid to sell the farm story (family background, organic production, and other farm activities, such as tours or farm stays available). Finding that price will require some number crunching to see what at a minimum will cover your costs, some exploration around the market, and some experimentation.

Build customer relationships. Customers who have a strong connection to you look for you at markets, buy your

products, and promote you to other potential buyers. As Thea True of the Downtown Casper Community Farmers' Market says, "Strive to gain repeat buyers through quality, education, and great customer service." Even if you don't plan to be a vendor each time the market is open, do what Joyce Johnston of Park County advises, "Be friendly with the customers!"

Know before you go. Don't be surprised about how the market operates – visit with the market manager, food safety authorities, peers, and potential customers. The more you talk and think about your business, the more prepared you will be when the time comes to begin efforts. In conversations with a manager, find out about the rules, regulations, fees, and market opportunities of the market. If you visited the market last year, what was being sold and what are the areas you could fill? If you don't know your market manager, there is a list at the Wyoming Farmers' Marketing Association at www.wyomingfarmersmarkets.org/. Recent changes in Wyoming's laws allow producers to sell non-potentially hazardous food products directly to customers exempt from inspection and licensing – well in advance of the market, contact your local health safety department or the Wyoming Department of Agriculture's Consumer Health Services division to find out about guidelines for farmers and the new cottage law at wyagric.state.wy.us/divisions/chs.htm or (307) 777-6592.

Plan your product mix. To increase sales, plan your garden (or other project) to have things that others might not have, as well as the normal products and produce that people are familiar with to increase sales. Keep in mind how you'll differentiate yourself – if everyone has tomatoes, how are yours better or different? True advises to "Plant early- and late-season crops to ensure produce is available for the entire market period (and so that your customers will keep coming back). Avoid tasteless varieties. Have variety within a product line (red, orange, and

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yellow tomatoes and/or large beefsteak to grape varieties.” She adds, “Keep in mind that heirloom varieties (vintage varieties that have been preserved by passing seed down from generation to generation) tend to bring higher prices.”

Help the customer. Not everyone knows how to store and prepare what is available at the market. Offer tips and hints. Go beyond the basics – everyone has a recipe for zucchini bread: what new and interesting things can be done with zucchini? And have plenty of bags handy.

Remember, market managers are interested in a healthy market, so they help their vendors in a variety of ways. Get on the mailing list for the market so the

manager knows to keep you informed about plans for the coming season. Markets have organizational meetings early in the year (such as in January) to keep vendors informed about the market and find out about vendor plans.

Thank you to those involved in the Wyoming Farmer’s Market Association’s Market Manager development program who provided insights for this article, including Joyce Johnston of Powell, Adam Sinnema of Gillette, Terry and Joni Sutherland of Riverton, Thea True of Casper, and Ted Craig and Linda Stratton of the Wyoming Department of Agriculture.

BEGIN YOUR VENTURE WITH A PLAN

Thinking about starting a venture on your acreage? Adam Sinnema of the Gillette Farmer’s Market recommends beginning with either a personal or family mission – a clear statement of who you are and what you want to accomplish. Then think comprehensively about the venture by building a business plan. “Whether you’re big or small, a clearly stated plan will be a ready reference when questions arise,” says Sinnema.

As the plan is built, collect necessary information about the clientele, laws, food safety, pricing, market potential, any value you will add, the resources you will need (the size of the garden, for instance, and the land, tools, and inputs such as fertilizer and soil amendments needed), equipment, and advisers. One approach is to imagine what is needed by thinking through different scenarios.

“Personally, I need to envision myself performing the activity and think of questions I may have or ways I may need to prepare,” says Sinnema.

Sinnema adds, “I also think strong relationships and open lines of communication are paramount for a small business to succeed. To prepare well, first understand your own expectations as well as the expectations of the market and those around you.”

Resources for thinking through a venture can be found with UW Cooperative Extension Service (<http://ces.uwyo.edu/Counties.asp>) educators as well as the Wyoming Department of Agriculture (<http://wyagric.state.wy.us>) and the Wyoming Business Council (www.wyomingbusiness.org/), among others.

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