



Rural regeneration through direct marketing of Audubon County meats

Abstract: Audubon County Family Farms direct-marketed their farm products through the downtown farmers market in Des Moines. In addition to selling their products, the farmers encouraged dialogue with urban consumers through personal interaction and educational activities.

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Background

Audubon County Family Farms (ACFF) was organized in the spring of 1997. The six members of the group already used sustainable agriculture practices, and reasoned that their products such as "hoop house hogs," local honey and fruit, and farm-raised chickens would be appealing to urban consumers.

The Audubon County Family Farms members wanted to add value to their products (primarily the meat offerings) and provide urban consumers with better food choices. In the long term, they sought to build a reputation for Audubon County based on its high-quality meat products, ability to direct market farm goods, and enhanced consumer relationships.

Approach and methods

The ACFF group direct-marketed their products for three seasons (1997-1999) at established Des Moines farmers markets. In addition to offering sustainably produced food items for sale, ACFF members sought to encourage communication between farmers and consumers through education, research, and marketing.

A visual display with explanatory text presenting these foods in an attractive manner was created to show consumers how products were raised. A directory was published to

introduce consumers to the farm families, raise consumer awareness about food issues, and showcase the products and prices.

Two standard research tools were used to generate feedback. In April 1998, a meat product survey was mailed to 150 consumers listed as Des Moines farmers market customers. The survey provided information about consumer preferences, purchasing habits, and concerns about meat production. Eight consumers from the group surveyed agreed to participate in two focus groups on meat and food issues.

Farm visits were another means of creating links between farmers and consumers. Everyone who visited the ACFF farmers market booth in Des Moines was offered an afternoon

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Budget:
\$12,153 for year one
\$11,746 for year two

**Direct sales at the
farmers market**



of farm tours and a meal prepared from ACFF products.

Results and discussion

The meat product survey had 47 responses and did not reveal any big surprises, but it did confirm some of what ACFF members had suspected. Consumers were buying most of their meat products from a grocery store, but few stated that they were "always satisfied" with what they purchased.

Only 15 percent were purchasing meat directly from a farmer, but a majority of those (70 percent) who did were "always satisfied" with what they got. The top three barriers to purchasing meat directly from a farmer were 1) farmers markets are not open year round (74 percent), 2) buying this way is too inconvenient, and 3) lack of freezer space limits the amount that can be purchased at one time. In addition, few customers (7 percent) were willing to drive to Audubon to pick up meat products.



Survey respondents indicated that they were concerned with food issues such as where the product was produced, where the meat was processed, how the animals were raised and treated, and whether the purchase supported family farms. Several respondents said that they would pay more for products that supported their positions on these issues.

The two focus groups discussed questions of food quality, safety, and security. Both groups indicated that they would be willing to pay slightly more for "locally grown products."

Sales figures from ACFF products were summarized by total sales as well as by pork sales, a cornerstone offering at the farmers market. Total sales increased by 33 percent from 1997 to 1998, and by 51 percent from 1998 to 1999. Sales of pork products increased by 106 percent between 1997 and 1998, and by 71 percent from 1998 to 1999.

Conclusions

Initially, Audubon County Family Farms included six farm families. Over the 27-month period of the project, two families moved away, one family stopped farming, and one family chose to leave ACFF and is restructuring their farm operation. Two of the original six farm families remain, and five other farm families have since joined ACFF.

From its beginnings with a loosely knit group of farmers, ACFF has been shaped by external events such as low commodity markets and internal events such as the abilities of the personnel involved. Because of these factors, group cohesion is not as strong as it could be and not all of the initial ideas have been implemented.

In spite of the organizational fluctuations, ACFF did achieve its goal to successfully market products to urban consumers through

the Des Moines farmers markets. Sales figures were up and the consumer mailing list grew from 50 to 225 households. ACFF will continue its sales program at the Des Moines markets beyond the terms of the grant period.

Documenting their educational activities, keeping financial records, and compiling consumer comments, ACFF has collected data that will be helpful to other farmers, researchers, and educators. Presenting what they have learned and mentoring others has been an important part of this project and will continue in the future.

Impact of results

The ACFF experience demonstrated that farmers may benefit from marketing their products cooperatively. The Audubon group also showed that obstacles (such as long-distance marketing and selling meat as a frozen product) that loom large at the outset may be overcome. Specialty products (hoop house pork, poultry, honey, apples, greenhouse tomatoes, etc.) proved to be worthwhile sales items for farmers.

From interactions with customers, ACFF members gained certain insights about consumers:

- 1) They want foods to be more accessible and year-round availability whenever possible.
- 2) They want more information (correctly presented and labeled) about the food they are offered.
- 3) Consumers in the focus groups were willing to pay more and put up with some inconvenience to get local products.

However, they claim (with considerable strength) that their urban neighbors will need more education and more convenience before they purchase local foods regularly.



ACFF table top display

Education and outreach

Educational materials produced and distributed to consumers by ACFF included:

1. Educational directory of ACFF producers,
2. Sales brochure,
3. One-page description of pork cuts for hotels, restaurants, and institutions,
4. Table top display about ACFF, and
5. Educational video about farmers who are direct marketing their products.

Articles about the project appeared in the Farm Bureau *Spokesman*, *Agri-News*, *Wallace's Farmer*, and the *Des Moines Register*. The ACFF marketing effort was described in the University of Minnesota's *Swine Sourcebook* and *The Legal Guide for Direct Marketing* by Neil Hamilton.

Educational evaluation

ACFF arranged for an outside educational evaluation of its operations at the end of the grant period. The evaluators looked at how ACFF's actual strategies and activities helped them meet their objectives, and they also gen-



erated recommendations for improvements. Information was gathered by a survey of ACFF customers and phone interviews with ACFF member-producers.

The majority of the surveyed customers became aware of ACFF through its presence at the Des Moines farmers market and through talking with the ACFF representative running its booth. All 25 customers surveyed for this evaluation said that the quality of ACFF products had met their expectations. The customers also agreed that the price of ACFF products has been fair and appropriate.

ACFF customers seemed in large part to have assimilated the message of ACFF regarding the benefit of a more localized food system. The two main reasons that these customers chose to purchase local produce were 1) prior or ongoing ties to agriculture and interest in supporting local production, or 2) food safety concerns that led them to believe that locally

grown food would be safer than food produced via conventional, industrial practices.

Most member-producers identified advantages and disadvantages in trying to direct-market as a group. Perceived advantages centered on outcomes achieved more easily and efficiently through collaboration, working as a group rather than individually. Disadvantages to group marketing were a greater time commitment and occasional difficulties in working together. Effective collaboration, although it can yield benefits, is not necessarily simple, obvious, or automatic.

All member-producers agreed that exposure at the Des Moines farmers market was a major benefit of ACFF's operation. Five of the seven member farms felt that the increased time needed for direct marketing had been offset by increased sales. Members saw room for improvement in equipment, structure, governance, and in the variety of products offered.

For more information contact Donna Bauer, Audubon County Family Farms coordinator, (712)563-4084.