



DIRECT MARKETING STRATEGIES

COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE

Farm subscription sales, often referred to as Community Supported Agriculture or CSAs, are one of the most direct ways to market your farm produce. Customers buy a CSA “share” pre-season, creating an early season cashflow for you as the farmer. Through the growing season the purchasers will get boxes of produce, flowers, USDA-inspected meats, eggs, dairy, baked goods, or other products at regular intervals (usually weekly). The CSA share is either delivered to the customer’s door, a drop-off site, or picked up at the farm.

BENEFITS OF CSAs

There are many benefits to this marketing method whether it is used in concert with others or on its own. Some of these benefits include:

Early Season Cash Flow

Because CSA shares are sold ahead of the growing season, it creates potentially significant cash flow during a time when many farms do not have sales income.

Consistent Value

Having customers already secured, and your farm products already paid for, means you are somewhat insulated from market fluctuations.

Flexibility

CSAs can be more flexible than other direct marketing strategies. Because CSAs are designed to provide a week’s worth of farm products to a single household, they require you to produce a diverse range of products. This diversity allows you to substitute one type of produce for another in case of a crop failure or delayed harvest.

Relationship Building

Because the structure of the share is a weekly pick up or delivery with the same customers, you have a great opportunity to build relationships and many customers return to the same farm for their CSA year after year. You’ve probably seen the “Who’s Your Farmer?” bumper stickers. CSA customers embrace this concept and are likely to refer to your operation as “their farm.”

CONSIDERATIONS

All direct marketing strategies have their downsides. Here are some things to consider before beginning a CSA:

Must Deliver

The weekly commitment of a CSA demands you have a good handle on production schedules and season planning. Though the CSA customer has bought from you and shared the risk of production throughout the season, you are not likely to retain that customer the following season if you do not deliver a steady stream of diversified products in each CSA share. With that in mind, it is better to start with only a small number of shares in your early years and grow gradually as demand increases. Having the very first year open to only friends and family can give you a grace period to work out any potential kinks without the risk of losing customers or garnering bad reviews.

Money Management

Though having early season cash flow to fund the purchase of supplies is great, you’ll also have to consider that you will have a reduced weekly influx of cash throughout the season as much of your product is already paid for. Make sure you plan appropriately to manage your budget and make sure you can meet your monthly financial obligations.

Customer Communications

CSAs can also require a bit more communication than other direct marketing strategies. Encouraging others to learn about seasonal foods and agricultural production can be a fun and fulfilling part of this type of marketing, but it can also be draining. Expect emails asking if customers can pick-up another day or send another person to pick-up their share, if a family can swap out one item they don't like for an extra of something they prefer, why tomatoes aren't available in June, etc. If you are providing products outside of standard grocery store fare, consider including in the box information on how to cook or prepare the unique items, or expect to answer cooking questions over and over.

Pickup

You'll need to secure a plan of how to get the produce to your customers. If you are in town, you can consider an on-farm pick up. If your farm is further out, you may have to offer a pickup location in town to attract more customers. You'll need to develop a policy on what happens if a share isn't picked up (How long do you hold it? Do you have an alternate pick-up option for folks that may have forgotten?). It is best to develop these policies before your CSA begins and let your customers know the policies when they sign-up and pay for their share. Make sure to stick to your policies as much as possible. If you allow frequent exceptions, you can expect to receive an increasing number of requests for customer accommodations.

OTHER MODELS

The most common CSA type is a weekly delivery of a variety of fruits and vegetables. However, CSA type marketing can also be successful for things like weekly flowers, milk, cream, or other dairy products, meat products, or occasionally single crops. Having many farmers or producers combine products for a shared CSA is another option. This model has the benefit of a wider variety of products than one operation could produce and expands opportunities to advertise to multiple operations' customer bases.

INSURANCE & SAFETY

If customers will be coming to your farm to pick up their CSA share, or attend farm workdays, or if you have interns/apprentices on the farm, be certain that you have adequate insurance in case of a mishap. (See *Fact Sheets 2.2 Insurance and 2.3 Liability for more information*).

RELATED FACT SHEETS IN OTHER CHAPTERS:

2.2 Insurance

2.3 Liability

