

Face to Face Farming and Eating:

Personal Relationships in Alternative Food Systems

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Our food system in the United States is both *globalized* and *industrialized*. Such a system has given American consumers abundant food that is perceived as low-cost, but has also contributed to the loss of smaller farms and the rural communities they supported. Many American consumers are grateful for a well-stocked supermarket that is open 365 days a year, 24-hours a day, just as many farmers and agribusinesses have been able to survive and thrive by supplying this system.



the heart of producing and consuming food. Such food systems are embedded in community interaction. They take a long time to develop,

but can be longer lasting and harder for the mass market to duplicate. This guide is written for farmers who are thinking about trying alternatives to hook up with sympathetic consumers.

Why Do Consumers Care about Alternative Food Systems?

However, the globalized, industrialized food system has not worked for everyone. For those farmers, consumers and small business people who don't want to participate in such a system, it is necessary to focus on alternatives. One alternative is to develop *localized, personalized* food systems, where personal relationships are at

Many people in the United States and Europe are beginning to raise questions about how their food is produced, where it's produced and who produces it. The numbers of such people are small but growing. Consider this: A 1996 report by the Hartman Group estimated that about 7 percent of the U.S. population prefers to buy

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products produced earth-sustainably, and another 23 percent would pay a small premium for them. At first glance, a mere third of the population may not seem like a large market. However, currently only 1 to 2 percent of the food consumed in the U.S. is organic, while the market for organically raised foods is growing roughly 24 percent per year. That means a lot of opportunity for farmers, processors, distributors and others to tap into consumer preferences.

Consumers participate in alternative food systems for a variety of different reasons. Farmers have to figure out which consumers they will target and why. The following categories include areas of concern to different consumers. Some concerns overlap with others. It is important to know the people you want to reach and why they might be interested in buying food from a local farmer.

The environment – Many consumers are concerned about the impact of their food choices on the environment. Some consumers worry about the petroleum usage of food shipped long distances. Others are concerned about pesticide use and potential impacts on wildlife and ground water. Some consumers fear the potential impacts of waste from large feeding operations on fish, wildlife, soil and groundwater.

Why do you think your food is better for the environment than conventionally produced food? Does the food you produce for people reduce pesticides in ground water? Have you reduced soil erosion on your farm by switching to grass-fed beef? Explain exactly what your practices are to consumers who express their concerns about the environment and you'll figure out what they want.

Humane treatment of animals – Vegetarianism is a growing movement, but some would-be vegetarians are mostly concerned about how animals were treated during their lifetimes and how they were slaughtered. They might ask

questions about the amount of sunshine and fresh air an animal received, or about its freedom of mobility.

Why do you think your animal was treated humanely and how are you going to communicate that to consumers? Were your chickens allowed fresh grass each day through the use of a chicken tractor? Were your animals raised with freedom of mobility – i.e. the absence of confinement? Explain your philosophy of animal rearing and why you use the practices you do. Many consumers will be happy to have the chance to talk to a farmer who can express how much he or she cares for their animals.

Food safety – Many consumers don't believe assurances of food safety from agencies such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture or the Food and Drug Administration. While these assurances are based in science, some consumers are skeptical because they don't think of science as being able to answer all of the perceived risks. Some consumers perceive industry bias in the approval process. Conversely, some are concerned about inspection as more and more food comes into the United States from other places. Still other consumers have food allergy problems or suffer from health problems that make it imperative they know exactly what is in the food they eat. It is important to understand what consumers find problematic and to be able to talk about why you consider your food safe.

What precautions and safety measures do you take to provide the safest food possible for your customers? Do you prohibit the use of antibiotics in the animals you sell directly to customers? Do you use a minimum number of chemicals (organic or conventional) on the food you produce? Many farmers talk about their sense of responsibility to customers in making sure they provide the safest food possible. Again, discussing your practices and why you do them will set many consumers' minds at ease.

Food quality – Consumers look for different things in terms of quality, including flavor, appearance and how long the food can be stored. As the food producer, you are going to have to make sure they understand why your product is of superior quality. You are going to have to educate your consumers about the quality of your products.

Why makes the food you sell such high quality? Show the best quality produce/meat you have and explain very carefully what makes that quality. Do you have a particular breed or variety that tastes great? Do cooking methods impact the quality of your product? Again, the key is to educate. But also remember that you need feedback from customers about what makes your product superior. Don't be afraid to ask.

Social justice – A growing number of people are becoming more and more concerned about the shrinking share of the food dollar that farmers receive. Some consumers worry that farm labor and processing labor are not treated well. Others are concerned that a global food system takes advantage of the have-not nations of the world. This is probably the most difficult concept to explain, but it becomes important to many people.

Why would your food be considered more "socially just" than that in a grocery store? Are you a family farmer committed to your family, your farm and your community? Are you farming to offer a quality of life to your family you believe you couldn't get elsewhere? Explain your philosophy of farming and quality of life to your customers. As a farmer you need to emphasize that you love what you do, but you need to make a fair living at it.

Rural communities – Some consumers from urban areas are genuinely concerned that the social infrastructure that supports rural life and culture is disappearing due to the changing nature of our food system. They are willing to make food choices that support farm families and the rural

communities in which they live. Some consumers who live in rural areas know very little about the agriculture and food system, even though concentration and control may be negatively impacting their quality of life.

What can you offer to urban people who might be interested in buying your food? Is it possible to offer days on the farm and tours of your rural community to people who might not otherwise get out to the country? In your own rural community, it is important that farmers remind community members that local farmers support the community and ask the same from them. Developing these relationships means that economic development starts right at the farm!

Faith – Citizens of the U.S. have been advised many times of the advantages of letting market forces weed out the efficient producers from the less efficient to ensure the most cost effective way of distributing goods and services. Benefits of our food system to consumers have been mostly measured as the low cost of food. However, many people in the United States make their economic decisions according to a different set of moral principles informed by a religious framework. Much Catholic and Protestant social teaching, for instance, upholds the idea of keeping land in the hands of those who work it, of respecting the land and all those who dwell on it. Many people in the faith community are interested in creating equitable relationships between farmers and consumers, and in encouraging respect between both groups.

Where Can I Find Consumers With These Concerns?

Hopefully, reading through these concerns has made you think about your present and future customers. Identifying those consumers is the next task.

Word of mouth – Many farmers who have successfully direct-marketed their food products

have said that word of mouth is their most important marketing tool. The key is to devise ways to encourage it. Serve your food at dinners when friends are being entertained and have your relatives and customers do the same. Make sure the dinner guests know how to get your food through a brochure or telephone number. Bring your product to church potlucks and tell people about it. Directly follow up on leads that customers give you.

"Buy your food from a farmer whose face you can see and whose farm you can visit."

Guy Clark, Fertile Crescent Farm

Target "Mom" – Although times are changing, women remain largely responsible for much of food preparation in our society. In addition, more and more parents are increasingly concerned about what they are feeding to their families. New concerns are arising about genetically modified or altered food. While this may not seem threatening to many, parents worried about the development of their children pay more attention to concerns such as these.

Where do mothers gather? Libraries have reading groups for preschoolers and mothers are often present. Pediatricians' offices might be a good source of literature about your farm and food products. Many churches sponsor mothers' groups. Homeschooling associations have many concerned parents. Parent-teacher associations might be another place to reach mothers.

Faith communities – Some churches might offer opportunities for farmers or groups of farmers to talk to church groups. Other churches have put together displays for Community Supported Agriculture farms in the vicinity. Ask your customers to leave your farm's brochure at their church or to mention it at church gatherings.

How to Build Relationships?

Once you've identified potential customers, building the personal relationship becomes

paramount. Relationships are at the heart of any successful family or community interaction. Nurturing relationships around food has the added benefit of nurturing new community relationships.

Face-to-face. The best way to build a relationship around food is to actually interact with your customer. Consumers develop loyalty to particular farmers over time. Moreover, it is difficult to tell a farmer one doesn't want to buy anything when the buyer directly knows the seller. Invite your

customers to do things with you in the community – like attend high school sporting events or community picnics. Try to interact with your customers outside the buying and selling relationship.

Five-minute friendships – A dairy farmer who direct markets his milk says that he knows each of his customers by name. When he delivers milk, bread, eggs and other food products, he asks one specific question to find out about their week and their lives. A typical consumer probably cannot imagine food being delivered to their house by someone who really cares what happened to them in the past week. Over time a relationship develops that is based around food but which can develop in a lot of different ways.

All of these ideas can be summed up in the phrase "Know the people who eat your food." Farming is about more than growing food, it includes helping your community grow as you establish and deepen your personal relationships with the people who eat your food.

Additional Resources

The internet has a wealth of information on many different aspects of alternative food systems. Visit our web-site at: www.foodcircles.umsystem.edu to learn more about our project and to find links to other information sources. If you are without internet access, call us at (573) 882-3776.