

Tools for Selling to Restaurants, Retailers and Institutions

Keys to a Successful Relationship

Selling directly to restaurants, retailers and institutions can be a great way to expand your business and develop a reliable customer base. This tip sheet is part of a series (all available at www.buylocalfood.com) designed to help farmers respond to the unique challenges in reaching out to and maintaining relationships with direct wholesale purchasers. When you approach restaurant owners, chefs, retailers, and purchasers at hospital, college and workplace cafeterias, you need to be prepared and professional. What follows are some tips for getting started and for keeping the relationship going strong over the years.



Initial Outreach

- Make an appointment to meet with the buyer in advance. Ask for a 15 minute meeting to introduce yourself, your farm, and your products. It's unlikely that you can make an immediate sale of items in your truck. If possible, bring a small sample.
- Have a written list of likely products and anticipated availability (based on your planting/harvest schedule).
- First impressions are important, and buyers appreciate a professional appearance. A clean shirt goes a long way!
- Make sure the scale of your operation is in line with the scale of your potential customer's needs. Be cautious about approaching potential buyers whose regular orders don't meet your minimums or exceed your capacity.

Consistent Communication

- Let your customers know what you may have available in 2-3 weeks. This is especially important for institutional customers who set their menus far in advance. Many purchasers expect a weekly faxed or emailed list of products and prices.
- Confirm delivery date and time, where it should be delivered and who to ask for. Ask for procedures for leaving the product if your contact person is not around—don't just leave product at the door.
- After your first deliveries, follow up with the buyer to find out how the product held up.
- Keep in touch. Identify the best contact person and find out their preferred method of communication and the best time to reach them. Let the buyer know the best way to contact you.

Pricing and Invoicing

- Know your price and price structure. Your customer should not be expected to value your product for you.
- Discuss the basis for your pricing with the purchaser. They may be working on extremely narrow margins as well, so some products are likely to be a better fit for wholesale markets, especially to cafeterias, than others.
- Bring a legible, complete invoice with the delivery of product and be clear about payment expectations. Some large institutions have very slow mechanisms for payments, so find out how long payments will take when you first meet with the buyer.





Develop Sense of Mutual Appreciation

- Encourage the chef or owner to talk to employees and customers about importance purchasing directly from farms. If possible, make yourself available to meet the staff or attend any events they hold to promote their local purchasing.
- Do not offer a general invite to your customers to visit the farm any time. If you would like them to see your operation, set up a date and time and ensure you have time to talk to them.
- Keep in contact with the purchaser even when the growing season ends. Check in to see if the business is anticipating changes and share plans that you are developing.
- Once a relationship has developed, buyers tend to be loyal to suppliers. This means that they are more likely to be open to changes in product or price fluctuations.

Know your buyer

- Ask the chef or owner for the best time to call and remain consistent about calling on certain days and at certain times.
- Know when the busy hours are in the cafeteria, store, or restaurant and base your outreach and deliveries around that schedule.
- Know what is on the menu at the restaurant and what the cost is per plate.
- Understand the limitations that purchasers are working under, such as internal food safety or insurance requirements.
- Understand your competition. Most wholesale purchasers have 3-4 main suppliers who have devoted resources to being available and consistent. Do your products proud and aim to meet the level of professionalism, accessibility, and consistency in your selling relationships that purchasers expect.



The tips and information on this sheet were adapted from comments made during a panel workshop organized by CISA in February 2008. The speakers were Alden Booth of The People's Pint, Matt Perpetua of Baystate Health Systems, and Mike McCusker of McCusker's Market. Funding for this project was provided by the Northeast Center for Risk Management Education, the USDA Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service.



One Sugarloaf Street
2nd Floor
South Deerfield, MA 01373
Phone: 413-665-7100
Fax: 413-665-7101
www.buylocalfood.com

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