COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND ENVIRONMENT

Marketing Via the Internet

Introduction

The Internet can be utilized in a variety of marketing strategies. Producers may sell their products online through e-commerce, use a website to take orders for their goods, or simply advertise their operation through a "billboard" type website. Social media and blogs provide yet another way the Internet can be used for promoting a farm enterprise. The increase in access to Web-based services through handheld devices makes many customers more immediately accessible to products and services.

This profile is intended to provide a summary and starting point for growers who are considering using the Internet for marketing. Producers interested in a more comprehensive guide for direct marketing on the Web should consult Penn State University's extensive publication list at http://extension.psu.edu/business/farm/marketing/social-media/publications.

Creating Your Own Web Page

FOCUS ON MARKETING, NOT SELLING

Establishing a presence on the Web can benefit your farm in many ways. The Internet can be great for promoting your enterprise and increasing your exposure to customers. Advertising and product promotion through a website is used by many Kentucky growers to let customers know what varieties are in season and what is going on at the farm. Not only

are more and more consumers shopping online, an even greater number are using the Internet to research future purchases. Your website can be another tool in a well-planned total marketing plan for your farm.

However, "marketing" does not necessarily mean "selling." The Internet may not be the best means for transacting sales. For example, taking orders online is not a good method of selling products advertised as "a premium, fresh alternative to other produce." However, the Internet could be used for taking orders for fresh produce delivery or for selling value-added items, such as honey, that can be easily shipped.

KNOW YOUR CUSTOMERS

Like any other market, Internet selling depends on knowing your customers. Asking yourself basic questions about your customers is a good place to start. Who are they? Do they have Internet access? Do they use email?

A clear idea of who your customers are and how they use the Internet will allow you to develop a website that

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meets your customers' needs. For example, there is no need to develop an elaborate, interactive website for your orchard if your customers are only interested in knowing when different apple varieties are coming into season.

DEVELOP A GOOD WEBSITE

A basic website should contain the farm name, business description, contact information, types of products available, and where to purchase products (e.g. farm store, farmers market, etc.). Business hours should be included when appropriate. Product descriptions with images and pricing information can help enhance the site and serve to better promote the items you are marketing. A more elaborate site can include additional information, such as farm news, special event notices, recipes, a "who we are" page, and a location map.

It is not enough just to have a website; you must have one that is well-designed. Unfortunately, there are many examples of poorly designed farm websites, including those for small farms engaged in direct marketing. The following tips will help you to avoid some of their pitfalls:

• The site should be eye-catching, well-organized, and easy to navigate.
• Keep the website simple. Avoid the excessive use of graphics and images that result in a lengthy download time.
• Choose font sizes and colors that are easy to read.
• Make sure your site is free of errors in spelling and grammar.
• Contact information should be clearly listed on every page.
• Only display information that will be relevant to potential customers.
• Maintain your website regularly and keep it up-to-date.
• Make sure your website is designed in such a way that it can be accessed via mobile devices

Marketing Through Existing Websites

KDA PRODUCT DIRECTORY AND WEB PAGE BUILDER

The Kentucky Department of Agriculture (KDA) maintains an online directory of markets and businesses that sell Kentucky agricultural products. In addition, the KDA Web Page Builder enables agribusinesses to create a simple Web page that can be accessed through the KDA directory. The KDA must approve all information, including any later updates, before it goes public on the Internet. The approval process can take up to five days.

This program is free to all Kentucky producers and has several advantages for growers who choose to participate. It is a great way to advertise, whether the business is just listed in the directory or a Web page is created. The Web Page Builder program is extremely easy to use and could be a good first step (or an alternative) for growers considering designing their own Web page. Businesses that already have an Internet site can include their company link in the directory listing and on the Web page, thus providing additional advertising. The information on the site can easily be updated at any time.

PRODUCT DIRECTORY

Information is provided for the KDA directory in two steps. Users should be prepared to provide their name, address, two phone numbers, FAX number, email address, name of a contact person, and the company website URL if there is one (step 1). The types of products being sold are added to the directory by selecting them from drop-down lists under the Country Store and/or Farm Store categories (step 2). The user can preview the directory information before submitting it to the KDA.

WEB PAGE BUILDER

Once the directory information is completed, users can choose to continue on with steps 3 to 5 to create a KDA Web page. Step 3 involves adding the text for the Web page. The information requested includes: the business name, list of products, slogan, company information, directions, hours of operation, and up to three locations where products are sold. Step 4 offers a selection of six different Web page designs

to choose from and prompts the user to create a website address (URL). Step 5, which is optional, makes it possible to add KDA logos and/or up to three JPG or GIF images to the site. Images must be 150 pixels across and no larger than 20K in size. The user can also include an e-commerce link to the Web page, if desired. The Web page can be previewed before submitting it to the KDA.

KDA Agritourism Website

The Kentucky Department of Agriculture (KDA) Division of Agritourism has launched a website for the purpose of promoting agritourism in the Commonwealth. Agritourism operators can have their business information included in the site's searchable database. In addition, the KDA will use the registrant's information to create a free Web page accessible from this site. Up to three digital images may be included with the business information. To register, click on the "Agritourism Business Submission Form" link near the top of the Kentucky Farms Are Fun home page. After saving the Agritourism Venue Information Form to your computer, the business data can be typed directly into the document and then submitted as an attachment via email. Alternately, the blank registration form can be printed out, completed by hand and returned via traditional mail. The KDA email address and postal mailing address are listed at the bottom of the registration form. You can also request an electronic form from the KDA contact person listed on the site.

On-line Directories and Databases

Adding your business to one or more online directories and/or searchable databases is another way to increase your farm's visibility on the Internet. Some of these sites will only list your business name and contact information, while others may allow you to enter additional information, such as a product list. Growers with a business Web page can generally include a link to their site, thus making that site available to even more customers.

The following is a list of some groups and organizations that maintain a directory or database online. A search of the Internet will no doubt reveal many more possibilities. While some directories/databases are available for free use, others may charge a fee.

- KDA Product Directory
- MarketMaker
- Grower associations
- National or local private specialty websites (e.g. there are online directories of pick-your-own farms)
- Kentucky Farm Bureau (Certified Roadside Farm Markets)
- Local Chamber of Commerce (online business directory)
- State, regional or county on-line farm directories

Use Email Effectively

Email has transformed the way that many farm marketers do advertising. The cost of direct mailings can be greatly reduced through the use of email. However, email can also turn into an annoyance for the consumer. Furthermore, many Web mail servers may identify your email as spam and it may never make it into the recipient's mailbox.

Follow these guidelines to help ensure that your email communication with customers is effective:
- Be concise — but without seeming in a hurry.
- Include your hours of operation, contact information, and brief directions.
- Let customers know when your next email update will be coming.
- Provide customers with a clear way to unsubscribe from the email list, if they desire.
- Always include other useful information in addition to what you are advertising. For example, if you have a farm peach festival approaching, provide some recipes using fresh peaches.
- Incorporate printable coupons into your email.

Web-based Social Media

Social media are Internet tools for sharing and exchanging information in the form of text,

photos, and videos. This includes blogs (Internet journals), as well as social networking programs like Twitter and Facebook. Flickr (photo sharing) and YouTube (video sharing) are also forms of social media. These Internet communication devices provide a way for anyone and everyone to post, share, and comment on various topics online.

Using social media to promote farming enterprises is a fairly new concept. Like a Web page, social media can allow growers to connect with a wider audience, one that extends well beyond the farming community. Social media, however, permits the user to connect on a bit more of a personal level (e.g. blogs) and often encourages exchanges between the grower and the general public (e.g. Facebook). As such, this Web-based tool is useful for building and strengthening relationships with both current customers and potential ones.

Farmers may choose to use social media tools to highlight their business, to showcase their products, and to educate the general public regarding farming practices. Social networking sites are useful for providing brief farm updates, such as when a particular crop is ready to harvest. Many of these social media tools have the added bonus of being free, or at least relatively inexpensive, to use.

One North Carolina blueberry grower reports a 25% increase in the number of customers visiting her farm since she began a weekly blog. Through the blog, she is able to keep customers interested in what is going on at her farm, promote her products, share recipes, and pass on

practical information to readers. In addition, the blog provides a valuable link between the non-farming community and the farm.

Growers wanting to pursue the use of social media should first define their purpose and goals. After investigating the various types available, they can then determine which methods will best meet these goals. Consideration should also be given to the grower's personality, abilities, and schedule. For example, writing a weekly blog will require a time commitment, writing skills, and a certain amount of creativity.

Selected Resources
• Kentucky Farms Are Fun (KDA Division of Agritourism)
http://www.kentuckyfarmsarefun.com
• Kentucky MarketMaker
http://www.marketmakerky.com
• Kentucky Product Directory and Web Page Builder (KDA) http://www.kyagr.com/buyky/webpage-builder.html
• Where to Buy Kentucky Products (KDA) http://www.kyagr.com/buyky/index.aspx
• Direct Marketing (ATTRA, 1999) http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/summaries/directmkt.html
• Web, Social Media and Direct Mail Marketing (Penn State) http://extension.psu.edu/business/farm/marketing/social-media
• Social Media in Agriculture (Ohio Farm Bureau, 2009) http://ofbf.org/media-and-publications/read/3/202/
• Why Social Media and Local Food Go Together Like Butter & Fresh Sweet Corn (Food Industry MarketMaker Blog, 2010) http://marketmakersupport.com/mmblog/?p=57

For additional information, contact your local County Extension agent