

MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SMALL-SMALL FARMER/GARDENERS

by Harry MacCormack

Small-small farms and market gardens operate in a marketing reality dominated by large-small farms. We all know the accepted entrepreneurial practices of very “successful” larger-small farms. They include high levels of management, staffs of 10-50 or more employees, large capital investments in farm equipment, grow-tunnel-greenhouses, walk-in refrigerators, processing-market preparation lines, refrigerated trucks large enough to handle multiple farmer’s markets in many locations and CSA drops in those locations, wholesales to Organically Grown or other distributors, retailers, restaurants throughout the region. These larger-small farms often operate on 20 acres or less. But with high overhead costs, their consumer prices are geared to an economy of high-end, urban, customers also used to life styles based in the rewards of economic success.

Their farm budgets are often in the quarter to million dollar range. These are the stars of the organic market place.

Economic marketing reality for small-small farms in this high stakes business atmosphere can seem daunting, especially to entry level growers who may not want to participate in the small farm marketing version of the dominate corporate paradigm. Is there another way?

This question led me to the ancient wisdom of the I Ching #46, Pushing Upward. The image poses choices between effort as opposed to progress, vertical ascent versus expansion. The metaphor reflects the growth pattern of wood in soil: “direct rise from lowliness to power and influence”. Pushing upward is made possible by modesty and adaptability. Individual activity, work, brings good fortune. Upward growth of wood adapts by bending around obstacles, moving upward without haste, without rest. This requires devotion to character, without pause.

How does such wisdom possibly guide a struggling small-small grower participating in a market economy?

First of all, you have to decide your economic survival. Do you really want to rely on your total economic needs coming from growing the foods you love? I remind you in this consideration of two facts: Over 70% (USDA figures) of all American farms rely on at least one source of off-farm income to remain viable; Amish and Pennsylvania Dutch farming tradition holds that one man can effectively farm two acres. (More requires horses, machinery, ever- larger capital, employees.)

In our high-tech world there are ways for small-small farms to gain market share. Usually they rely on introducing yourself and your produce to a very local community in a way that doesn’t really compete with larger-small farms. Most large farmer’s markets , local restaurants and alternative natural type food stores are dominated by the larger small farms. So what kinds of sales are left?

Use internet communication to your advantage. That might include My Space or even Twitter as ways of letting potential unaligned customers know what you have and who you are. Send out a weekly list from which they can choose, set up order date, and tell you whether they will pick-up at your location or whether you need to deliver. Your distinct advantage: Picked and delivered same day produce. For greens, especially, this translates into a distinct nutritional advantage that larger operations cannot emulate. We've used this process for a season at Sunbow Farm. We've attracted a whole new number of consumers as a result. At the farm pricing allows us to be affordable, an attempt on our part to address the complaint that farmer's market prices are often as high or higher than natural foods store prices. Optional home delivery in our near by town is just what new moms, retired semi shut-ins, and those too busy to go to markets love.

Along the same lines, a group of growers in the Eugene area utilizes a complex computer program to offer a virtual farmer's market.(Eugenelocalfoods.com) Together they pool produce, which comes to a drop point once a week. Internet orders are coordinated by the organizers ,who do charge a fee for service. Again, this type of service makes it possible for small-small growers to operate with some of the advantages of a larger small grower while offering same day fresh.

Both of the above marketing strategies appeal to younger, urban, working families who want the best food, fresh, and affordable. The small-small farm has more leeway with pricing because of lower overhead. Even so, set pricing so that you pay expenses and yourself.

Another strategy is to see yourself as a grower-organizer, and act on that perception. Working with a neighborhood organization, a church, a community center, retirement facility, help initiate small grower based buying clubs. This activity can extend to small growers being back yard or community garden based. Seeing an urban or suburban area as a farm, sharing space, rotations, equipment, labor, can be an effective way to grow lots of food, feed lots of people, and market what you grow, to that community, or even as a collective stand in a larger farmer's market. Operations along these lines in L.A. and Chicago have been featured on national T.V. recently.

These small-small marketing suggestions all allow for lower local pricing, because they are not rooted in high overhead. CCA or community cooperative agriculture , (as different from CSA community supported agriculture) need not require up-front payments. Organization and trust replace that factor as a planned season unfolds with one or many small growers feeding many middle to lower class families or even the poor and homeless as a market. In an organized, food-based, community effort individuals support each other as the basic exchange rate, bending around dollars per hour with labor for food trades, marketing with an eye to the well-being of those who have economically speaking the least rather than the most. Again, such an effort is not possible when trapped in the entrepreneurial model currently dominating markets. For instance, it is not usually the case that a neighborhood farmer's market is established limiting the size of stall space, effectively excluding the larger small farms. (We did this at the original Portland based People's Wednesday market).

The very definition of marketing is radically different in the examples mentioned. Rather than simply growing as part of regional or even local commerce, re-organizing business agreements allows small to remain small rather than expansive. This practice will attract a cliental who appreciate what you do.