

Tips for Developing a Marketing and Sales Plan as part of the Community Farmer Application Form

The Community Farmer program is for folks who want to grow and sell vegetables. This is what makes it different from a Community Garden. Community Farmers need to figure out how they are going to sell whatever they grow.

The Application Form asks: ***How do you plan to sell what you grow? Where will you sell?*** One of the requirements in the Community Farmer program is that *"You must be planning to sell your harvests within Flemingdon Park or within your community neighbouring Flemingdon Park."*

You have a number of options for selling your harvests. Choose more than one way of distributing your veggies. Your preferred way of selling may not always be completely successful. The Application Form asks you for a back-up plan. Below is a list of a few different options; you can mix & match & modify.

1. **The weekly on-site farmers' market.** This market will be established and coordinated by the Farm Coordinator. The exact location will be determined in the spring. The advantage of selling at this farmers market is that you can just bring whatever you manage to harvest that week. You are not committing to customers in advance, which can be stressful, especially when starting out. Also, as Community Farmers, there will be no fees to sell at the market, and you will be provided with everything you need: tent, table, scale, bins, etc. Selling at a farmers' market does take time though: you have to set up, stand at your booth selling your harvest; and clean up afterwards. You need to think about how much time you can commit to selling your harvests. Also, there is no guarantee that you will be able to sell everything you offer.
2. **Custom orders.** Another option is to develop a customer list, which is a list of people you contact each week to tell them what you have available. They order, and you deliver. Communication and orders could happen on-line, by email, by phone, and/or in person. This lets you connect with folks who won't attend the farmers' market. It lets you develop your own customers that have a special connection with you, their farmer. Perhaps you could focus on selling to only folks in your apartment building or in your immediate neighbourhood.
3. **Subscription or CSA program.** The next level of commitment is a subscription program, or Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, where customers pay in advance and receive a weekly share of the harvest, and you commit to do your best to provide them with lots of different vegetables each week. This type of marketing and sales plan requires the greatest level of skill on behalf of the farmer, and should only be attempted by confident, experienced growers.
4. **Wholesale.** You could sell to a restaurant and/or grocery store. You could also sell to someone who would process it into something else (like pickles, or sauce). You could also do this processing yourself. This could let you focus on growing only a few crops really well. It would also likely reduce the amount of time that you spend selling. But, the revenue would be less than if you sold to regular customers. If you are interested in this option, connect with potential wholesale customers in advance, tell them what you hope to be able to offer, get a sense of the price you would receive -- then you can decide if you think this is a good option for you.

The Application Form asks: ***How will you promote your farm?*** You need to let potential customers know that they should buy from you, otherwise they won't. Promotion and advertising are vitally important. Your micro-farm is a business, and you are in the business of selling vegetables. If you are accepted into the Community Farmer program, you could consider pursuing these ways of promoting your business:

1. Have a catchy, memorable farm name. Something unique. Something that people can connect to.
2. Develop a logo. Something visual that folks will be able to instantly associate with your farm.

3. Develop a business card. Something you can pass around to everyone you meet. Folks need a way to get in touch with you. FoodShare can help you design a business card, and pay for printing.
4. Make up flyers and/or posters. These would have more information than your business card, and you could put them up in the neighborhood, in your building, and give them away to everyone. FoodShare can also help you develop and print flyers and/or posters.
5. Use social media. If you are comfortable on social media, then this is a great way to spread awareness.
6. You could go all the way and develop a website.
7. For folks selling at the farmers' market, it will be somewhat easier because the Farm Coordinator will be working in many ways to promote the farmers' market and bring customers to the market. However, you should not rely on just this means finding customers.

The application asks ***Have you done any market research?*** This is asking if you have a sense of how much interest there is in buying from you. You will need to do this at some point if you are planning to do custom orders, or run a subscription program, or sell to wholesale customers.

The Application form asks: ***What is your competition?*** Customers have options; what are their options? Competition could include grocery stores, other farmers, other food box delivery programs, etc. It is important to think about your competition because it will help you focus on what you can offer that is different or unique. What is it that will make your produce different, and that will make customers choose to buy from you rather than the competition? Perhaps you want to grow something that isn't available at the grocery store. Perhaps you want to emphasize the freshness, or flavour, or quality of your product. Perhaps the most unique thing about your farm business is that it is your farm business, and people want to buy from you because you are their friend, or neighbour, or relative, or coworker -- and they want to support and help you by buying your food. Perhaps it is some or all of these things, or something else entirely.

The last question in the Marketing Plan is: ***How will you set your prices?*** This is a very important thing to consider. Here is an illustration. Let's say that you are planning to grow lettuce, and are hoping to sell 30 heads each week from July through October. That would be 450 heads of lettuce for the year. If you sell the lettuce at \$1.50 each, then you could make \$675. But, if you sell the lettuce at \$2.00 each, then you could make \$900. A \$0.50 difference becomes a \$225 difference. Now consider all the other veggies you are going to sell. In this way, a minor change in prices could have a very significant impact on your overall revenues. Of course, you don't want to set your prices so high that people won't buy from you. Go back and consider what is unique about your farm business. Will you be able to attract enough customers so that they would be willing to buy from you even if your produce is slightly more expensive? Or, maybe you are not motivated by the idea of making money and just want to make fresh, local, vegetables available and affordable in your neighbourhood. Perhaps what is unique about your farm business is how cheap you sell the produce - and that will bring you your customers. There is no perfect answer to the question of how to set your prices, but it is something that needs to be considered. The Application Form is asking how much you have considered how you will set your prices.

Conclusion

Community Farmers do not want to just grow vegetables and then figure out in July how they are going to sell them. There is no point growing something that will not be sold. The Application Form is not asking for a detailed Marketing and Sales Plan. It is not asking you to have already developed your promotional materials, done loads of market research, and determined your exact prices. But it is asking you to have a basic Marketing and Sales Plan. A strong application will have a clear, realistic and researched plan, and back-up plan in place.