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Adjusting Direct Marketing to Selling On-line, a 24-7 Opportunity

A shift was already underway to ordering food online in America, prior to the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic. U.S. online grocery sales grew 22% in 2019 and, propelled by high demand from nationwide COVID-19 lockdowns, stands to surge about 40% this year, according to the Coresight Research U.S. Online Grocery Survey 2020. Shopping for food online has become normal, if not the “new normal”. Farmers who direct market their products and craft food entrepreneurs can also implement the online tools necessary to capture these profitable food and beverage sales.

Your Website

Your website is your home-base for branding your farm products and conducting e-commerce. Not having a website for your business is like not having a telephone number. We have so many options available to us today when it comes to building a website. From DIY platforms to professionally-built and completely custom sites, navigating all of the possibilities can be overwhelming. Some platforms like WordPress, Wix, Weebly and Squarespace are website builders with e-commerce functionality, whereas BigCommerce, Shopify, and Local Line Sites were designed as e-commerce platforms. The former have more template options than latter and are more geared to design and content, whereas e-commerce platforms have more sales channel integrations. WordPress is self-hosted and requires a plugin called WooCommerce.

It is best to use as many “out-of-the-box” features from any of these sites to build a website that you can edit yourself when needed. **Security, Security, Security:** this can't be stressed enough. When choosing your hosting company (if applicable), always find out what the processes and procedures are for backing up and updating your site regularly, and what their process is if anything goes wrong—like if you get hacked, or your website goes down for any reason.

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Getting an On-line Store Up and Running.

Electronic commerce (e-commerce) is a transaction for goods or services enacted on-line. It could be the sales of products, reservations, or providing a service all simply paid for on-line. E-commerce can be an attractive and very cost effective way to allow customers to shop anytime, anywhere, and on multiple devices. It can also allow you the flexibility to fulfill orders on your own time schedule.

Since managing an e-commerce platform comes with a considerable investment in time and resources, here are a few items to consider before committing to one:

- 1) Are you looking for a short-term sales boost to move some inventory, or are you looking to develop a long-term platform for selling direct to consumers?
- 2) What is your expectation level for how long it will take to develop this channel?
- 3) What are the unforeseen logistical consideration? Do you have adequate bandwidth to support posting lots of pictures on your online catalog? Do you or your staff have the time to devote to e-commerce sales?
- 4) Mobile compatibility is essential as more consumers search and order products on their tablets or smart phones. Select a platform that ensures mobile compatibility and offers you a preview of your site.
- 5) Select a platform that is compatible with your existing website. A third-party hosted platform removes most of the technical support concerns and can have you up and running faster than a self-hosted system.
- 6) Safe and secure credit card or other payment systems is a must! Such as using services through PayPal or Apple Pay. Customers need to know their payment information is safe and secure when ordering through your website.
- 7) Which platform is the easiest to use for your type of business? Consider features such as customer account set-ups, payment options, customer service options, and of course the cost and fees involved.

e-Commerce Platform Options

Once you have determined how you want the e-commerce store to work with your existing online systems, you can select from the many available platforms out there.

The National Young Farmers Coalition has developed the “Farmer’s Guide to Direct Sales Software Platforms” with the following stipulations:

“While markets, restaurants, and other food distribution channels close or reduce operations to prevent the spread of COVID-19, farms across the country have expressed interest in using software platforms that support direct sales to consumers in their communities. This publication highlights product options and sales models that farmers may find helpful. The selected products are farm-specific sales platforms that support single-farm,

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direct sales. Generic e-commerce platforms, platforms that sell farm products to consumers, and farm aggregators or food hubs are not included.”

<https://www.youngfarmers.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Farmers-Guide-to-Direct-Sales-Software-Platforms.pdf>.

Popularly rated e-commerce platforms not detailed in that guide include:

- ▶ Shopify—best all-round e-commerce platform.
- ▶ Wix—best website builder with e-commerce functionality.
- ▶ BigCommerce –best for large and fast-growing businesses.
- ▶ Squarespace—best for high quality templates and aesthetic storefronts.
- ▶ Square Online Store—best value for money.

This is not an exhaustive list and new programs are sure to be added in the future. Costs and specific features offered vary by program and subscription level. Some available services vary by region.

Once you have decided on your e-commerce platform, you will need to “build” your store by listing the products you have available. If the list seems overwhelming, start with your core products that you have in good supply.

Maximize Your e-Commerce Efforts

The hybridization of both direct and online sales channels has only accelerated as retailers, producers, and food entrepreneurs double down their efforts to capture more sales. Whether you have already pivoted to an e-commerce platform or are still considering building an on-line catalog, here are some important considerations for maximizing your e-commerce efforts.

If you already have an e-commerce platform you may need to make some revisions:

- 1) Consider an open and/or shut time ordering time to manage order volumes.
- 2) Pictures must be very clear to differentiate varieties and the item descriptions should be fairly detailed.
- 3) Inventory management requires timely update. Selling on-line means rapidly changing inventories.
- 4) Have you activated the “abandon cart” feature for your platform? This feature can remind customers to finish an order with you.
- 5) Does your platform offer a “Reply” feature for scheduling or questions?

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- 6) Are you tracking and charging sales tax where applicable?
- 7) Limit your product listings to a maximum of 50 items and you will increase sales.
- 8) Simplify your product packaging and pricing. Offering a mix of products in a “bundle” can increase your average order size and move inventory.
- 9) The most successful on-line farms offer direct delivery to their customers. People still have convenience as a shopping criteria and offering delivery services or subscriptions can help build customer loyalty and retain more of your new customer base.

Additional Resources:

▶ **Farmers Selling Online—Choosing a Platform**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-ojXWIM43g>

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▶ **The University of Maryland Extension Agricultural Marketing Program.**

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The Agriculture Marketing Program’s mission is to assist individuals with marketing plans, develop profitable, sustainable marketing opportunities, and work in coordination with other supporting agencies to enhance Maryland’s agricultural economy.

▶ **The Maryland Rural Enterprise Development Center**

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