

## MASTERING MARKETING



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## Matching Products to Customer Appetites in 2018

Every December I enjoy reading food trend predictions for the coming year from a variety of sources such as the Specialty Foods Association, the American Restaurant Association, Packer magazine, and a host of foodie blogs. There's no doubt that customers' appetites, buying preferences, and cooking preferences will drive what we should produce and market. While predictions of interest in charred foods, algae grown proteins, and insects as a food source trending as "micro livestock" are interesting, there is solid support for the following food preferences in our region. Consider these customer demographics as you plan your 2018 production mix and marketing message:

- ▶ **The Foodie Budget** - Foodies are well informed about where their food comes from and how to prepare it. Foodies on a budget enjoy the richer experience of cooking their own meals at home. They will support true local and are willing to pay a premium price for a premium product. But, they are also demanding convenience and flavor adventures. Does your marketing message say "me too"? That your product is just like someone else's? Or can you tell shoppers "why me"? What makes your products different from others in your market segment? This same message applies to both retail and wholesale marketing.
- ▶ **Food Entrepreneurship** - There is a tremendous interest in food entrepreneurs making and selling their own products. Maryland's Cottage Food law has helped spark that interest and University

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of Maryland Extension's Food for Profit Workshops are in demand across the state. Specialty breads, baked goods, Gluten-free products, and other shelf stable baked goods are now appearing at farmers markets and organizational events. Food entrepreneurs are using their websites and social media to market their products and find marketing collaborators. Producing safe food for sale is a serious business. It requires working with health regulations, adhering to labeling and marketing requirements, financing, and production logistics. Still, the "buy local" customer preference dovetails seamlessly with the "made local" purchasing preference.

- ▶ **Cutting Waste** - As consumers become more aware of how much food is wasted in this county, as much as 30-40 % of the food we produce, they are looking for products made from items that might have otherwise have been sent to the trash or compost pile. Imperfect fruit pressed into juices, soups from ugly veggies, snack from fruit pulps, and snack bars made from a variety of grain wastes. Do you have a new product you can produce by upcycling?
  
- ▶ **Root-to-Plate** - Along with the desire to cut food wastes and the Nose-to-Tail butchery trend , consumers are more willing to look at root, stem, and leave cooking. These types of products include pickled rinds, broccoli or cauliflower stem slaws, or pesto made with various waste parts. Chefs are leading the charge as produce "butchers" opening the door to acceptance of a wide variety of new products. As always though, taste and quality is a must and you'll need to invest some time in educating your customer about the origin and use for these products. Watch for the development of these as packaged products in the grocery store chains.
  
- ▶ **Product labeling** - labels can be a big cost in your marketing budget but they can be your silent salesperson that seals the sale with customers. Customers are seeking more on-label information about the farms, ingredient sources, supply chain, or any verifiable third-party endorsement for the items they put into their cart.