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## Ginger S. Myers

MARKETING SPECIALIST,  
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND  
EXTENSION

DIRECTOR, MARYLAND  
RURAL ENTERPRISE  
DEVELOPMENT CENTER

PRINCIPAL AGENT  
ASSOCIATE

[gsmyers@umd.edu](mailto:gsmyers@umd.edu)  
301-432-2767 x338

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# MASTERING MARKETING



## You're Going to Need a Different Marketing Plan

According to online sources, "May you live in interesting times" is an English expression which purports to be a translation of a traditional Chinese curse. Everyone can agree that these are indeed "interesting times" and feels like every day brings more negativity. The actions taken to curtail the viruses spread will have long ramifications.

No one can really predict what markets will look like after this crisis but, for farmers, direct marketers and craft food and beverage producers, we know our current marketing plans and outlets are now inadequate. It's as if you've been handed a bag of puzzle pieces without a picture of what the puzzle will look like when you assemble it. Also, the color of the puzzle pieces in the bag keep changing. Quite a challenge!

However, as agri-entrepreneurs, you have had to develop the skill sets needed to change plans and look for opportunities quickly to affect your puzzle's picture. While markets are still very fluid and international policies are beyond our control, here are some marketing and product suggestions that can be considered right now:

### MARKETING ACTIONS TO CONSIDER RIGHT NOW:

1. If your product is sold direct to consumers, get an on-line store up and running. It will require you to "build" your store by listing the products you have available. If the list seems overwhelming, start with your core products that you can list and have in good supply. This requires you to have a website. Possible platforms to consider hosting your store are Shopify, Square, and Graze cart. These three have on-line help available to get you started. There will be a cost for doing business with them. Other platforms may start appearing soon.

Giving your customers the ability to order directly from you on-line and then providing delivery to their door is the model that is going to survive through this period. It's also a model that will serve you afterwards so it's a good investment of your time now.

2. If you don't offer gift cards or gift certificate, offer them now as a way to generate income now. Market these as ways folks can help others source your good products or for their own purchases later.
3. Look for ways to collaboratively market with others. This might include providing additional products to CSA farms or farms with on-farm markets and farm stands.
4. "Market style" CSAs/farm shares are going to be a thing of the past. You are going to need to pre-box customer orders.

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5. If you are currently selling at a farmers market, take pre-orders so you have set sales and customers can grab and go with your products.
6. Keep in touch with your Farmers Market management. Some markets have stayed open but, others are being closed. Do you have an outlet for your product if your market opening is delayed? While some folks consider food as medicine, do not give out medical advice. Our job is to connect customers with our fresh, nutrient dense offerings and assure your products are safe.
7. Collect emails from your customers and develop your email marketing list. This will be your major tool for staying in touch with your customers, not your other social media tools. Ask, ask, ask for these emails. You can have a signup sheet at your market, on your Facebook page, or on website. Invest some time in getting these email addresses loaded on an email platform such as Mail Chimp. However, you must have the person's permission to add names to this platform.
8. If you are a contract grower, stay in touch with your buyers for projections and market options for the upcoming season. Yes, folks will still need food, but the major shipping, processing, and distribution channel are also trying to predict their needs and markets.

**MARKETING ACTIONS TO CONSIDER GOING FORWARD:**

1. Are there value-added products you can make with excess fruit or vegetables if direct market sales continued depressed? Sauces, jams, or dried products can extend your products' shelf life and give you additional sales, but there are regulations and good manufacturing practices you will need to follow. Consider your options, research the production process, and check out the Maryland Department of Health's Food Protection regulations you will need to follow to produce those products.
2. Review Maryland's Cottage Food laws to determine if there are products you can make in your home kitchen to add to your marketing mix.
3. With Spring the cusp, now would be a good time to take new photos of your farm. Using your Smart phone can make video production easy. Consider developing a video series about your farm, perhaps what you are planting now, or show how you raise your products. Post these on your website as a blog so they are easier for folks to share with others. Remember that children may be watching these as well since schools are closed, so please have child-appropriate content.

**OTHER BUSINESS CONSIDERATIONS:**

1. In any period of economic uncertainty, cash becomes "King". How will you cover operating expenses but still have cash on hand for emergencies? Do you have several months of your family's living expenses in reserve?
2. Carefully consider whether now is the time to add more debt to your operation, even at the very low interest rates currently available.
3. If your supplemental workforce is not allowed to enter the county, what production changes need to be made right now?
4. Take care of your own health and consider the health of your employees. Do you have a plan for getting your work done if you or your employees become ill or are quarantined?
5. Get ready for some "whiplash anger" from frustrated customers, wholesalers, and even other producers. These are very stressful times and every day seems to be more challenging. Don't take it all personally.

**SERVICES FROM UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND EXTENSION**

All Extension offices around the State are closed. At the moment we are not certain when we will be permitted to reopen. We realize that this will cause inconvenience for our constituents given the services we provide. However, we are all still teleworking and you can contact your local Extension professionals via their email or phone for assistance.

You are welcome to email me with marketing questions or concerns at [gsmyers@umd.edu](mailto:gsmyers@umd.edu). We will send out communications as the situation changes and if our response to has altered. Thank you for your understanding.