

## Chapter 5. Marketing the farm food business

In this chapter, you will:

- Define a target market
- Identify customer loyalty building strategies
- Understand key marketing plan components
- Review key event flow logistic considerations

“Build it and they will come” may work as a marketing tactic for rural destinations in Hollywood movies, but unfortunately isn’t a viable success strategy for your on-farm food service business. However, the good news is your marketing plan doesn’t need to be expensive, complicated, boring cookie-cutter or traditional. Given the uniqueness of such on-farm dining options and the growing customer demand as well as media interest, you possess a timely opportunity to take advantage of this momentum before the market potentially saturates.

Remember the cupcake craze: the first pioneers of this trend capitalized on the media frenzy and consumer curiosity as folks lined up and waited for a bakery product that one could argue isn’t even particularly unique. After the glut of cupcake shops and related reality television shows, the food trend buzz moves on to whatever the next big thing may be. Take advantage of current timing and be the first in your area to offer a distinct on-farm dining experience and reap the benefits from being the entrepreneurial pioneer. However, realize that being a “pioneer” may have it’s long-term consequences as well as the current hot farm-to-table trend may at some point diminish. The strategic question for you to consider is how to make investments wisely to best adapt and successfully weather through such potential future changes.

**Comment [JJ1]:** The concern this brings to mind is that this might be a trend that will pass and so investments should be made accordingly.

### Identify your target market

Your “target market” refers to that core group of people who will support your business most frequently. Remember you can’t be everything to everybody, so it is important to narrow down and identify who exactly would be most likely to seek out, drive to and often pay a premium for an on-farm dining or prepared food experience. Don’t think of yourself as necessarily competing with a local restaurant and needing to, ~~essaying to~~ lure and convince customers to come to your farmstead instead. Those seeking on-farm dining experiences, your potential customers, are not looking for a quick, easy, cheap meal. You are not competing with the fast food, drive-through market, but rather people who are:

**Comment [JI2]:** Changes made per Jan’s comment above.

- Looking for unique and off-the-beaten path experiences (and are willing to drive for it)
- “Foodies” – those seeking authentic flavors and artisan foods
- Supporters of sustainable and organic agriculture
- Understanding of the price/value of farm-fresh fare – and willing to pay it.

**Comment [JJ3]:** ? not sure what this means

Additionally, some of the more casual on-farm dining experiences such as pizza farms, given the informal take-out service and outdoor seating, attract the family target. Whereas at indoor restaurants it can be a challenge to control fidgety toddlers or crying babies, the pizza farm environment allows and encourages “kids to be kids,” gives them space to move, and open air acoustics to be themselves (and not embarrass parents in the process!).

But the most lucrative and loyal target market is right in front of you: Your established, long-term farm customers. From CSA members to those dedicated folks you see at your farmers’ market booth every week, these are the people who will most likely be both happy to pay to attend your event and spread the word and invite friends.

### **Prioritize customer relations**

The “80/20 rule” in business refers to the idea that for many things in life, 80 percent of the outcomes come from 20 percent of the inputs. Interestingly, this theory stems from agrarian roots: Sometimes known as the “Pareto principle” as Italian economist Vilfredo Pareo observed in the early 1900s that 80 percent of the land in Italy is owned by 20 percent of the population and that 20 percent of the pea pods in his garden netted 80 percent of his pea crop. The same principle applies to on-farm events: a core group will keep returning and loyally championing your business, providing that much-needed word-of-mouth marketing.

You’ll quickly identify the core group of returning customers; be sure to thank them for their loyalty. For businesses like pizza farms, this can be done with a punch card similar to what you see at coffee houses where you “buy 12 get one free.” Or simply spontaneously giving away something free to these loyal customers – a complimentary pizza on your birthday – goes a long way in solidifying customer loyalty.

Make sure to have your core customer’s contact info on file. With the seasonal nature of on-farm food businesses, it’s like an intense summer romance that fades away in winter and needs to be re-ignited. A holiday card to loyal customers with some updates of new pizza combinations or dinner offerings planned for the upcoming season treats your loyal followers as friends versus clients.

Likewise, tap into this faithful customer pool for feedback and suggestions for your business. They will readily be your “eyes and ears” during the event as your focus will undoubtedly be elsewhere, plus it always helps to have an objective perspective. Send an e-mail survey out during the winter to get feedback on new pizza combinations and let your loyal customers “name” a pizza or come up with a theme for a farm-to-table dinner.

Look beyond your paying customers and prioritize developing and maintaining strong relationships with your neighbors. Depending on your local licensing authority and zoning, these may have been the same people you needed to convince to start in the first place. They may not, however, be in your target market and may not come and pay for pizzas or dinners on

[the farm](#). You could offer free tickets or simply drop off some pizzas at the end of the evening. By feeling a part of and connected to your business, neighbors can evolve into partners and supporters. When what's happening on your property is more of a "mystery" with "strange city folks" arriving in droves, rumors fly and misunderstandings erupt.

### **Outreach and marketing**

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, marketing your on-farm food service venture does not need to be an expensive, complicated process – but it still needs to be a priority [and requires an](#) on-going commitment. Here are some key components to get started:

- Word of mouth referrals

The most effective form of advertising is also the cheapest – but it's also something you can't buy if you wanted to, it needs to be earned: loyal customer referrals.

- Website

Look at your website as that key information portal where a potential customer can find all the details they need to show up, attend, pay and enjoy. You are busy running the farm, the food business and a long list of other commitments, most of which keep you outside and off the computer (and you probably like it that way!). Ensuring a complete and accurate website start attendees out on a happy, positive note as they can readily find your place and know what to expect.

While there are lots of opinions about what makes a great website, ease of navigation remains important. Most websites either have a navigation bar across the top or along one side, containing words or a graphic that connects you to key components, or pages, on the site.

Key elements to make sure you include on your website, which most likely will be a separate page off your already existing farm page:

Succinct description of event: Dates, start and end timing

Any details on reservation or tickets, if needed

Detailed directions: Complete address, Google map link, written instructions off the nearest major highway; printable map as a pdf. The more directional detail, the better. Include any details if needed on parking.

Pricing and payment methods (cash, check or credit cards/which ones)

Past event photos (helpful so folks know what to visually expect)

Additional detail on what to bring, such as dishware for picnic-style eating, additional side dishes and drinks (i.e., if you only serve pizza).

Pet policy (~~Most venues do not allow pets, from both a safety perspective in relation to and explain this from the perspective that there already potential conflict with your other are~~ animals on the farm and livestock. Additionally, dogs and cats are not allowed near the food preparation area for food safety reasons).

**Comment [JJ4]:** I think the livestock thing is covered in Rachel's sections, but family pets (dogs/cats) should also be addressed from a food safety perspective – as well as a customer perspective.

This information can also be organized (or repeated) via a “frequently asked question/FAQ” section off the main event page.

Be sure to include a slice of your personal story. This helps differentiate why what you are doing is so distinctly different than any restaurant out there, especially a cookie cutter franchise. A simple “About” page could include a photo of you in the kitchen preparing the meal along with a lively question and answer format that helps support and promote your story. Replies to the following questions may be a great place to start:

- Why did you start (your business name)?
- How did you get started making your pizza/dinner/etc.? Any special recipes or techniques you use?
- What makes the experience on your farm unique?

Other things to consider including on your webpage:

Media page listing any press links

Photo/slide show page

List/links to other food purveyors you use for ingredients you don't grow yourself (i.e., cheese, wheat, etc.)

Testimonial endorsement quotes from attendees. This can be especially important to give an authentic perspective on the event, communicating it's uniqueness so potential attendees have the right expectations. For example:

“Fabulous Farm Pizza Night is a hidden gem, best for folks who like things off the beaten path (literally -- wear good walking shoes as you'll be heading downhill) and rustic (don't expect tablecloths and bring your own drinks). This isn't a cookie-cutter franchise. In fact, there's nothing cookie-cutter about anything here. Each pizza is made to order and the crowd can get large so bring snacks and plan on waiting at least an hour during peak times, 6-8 pm. This is “slow food” at it's finest. Enjoy the beautiful setting and sunset and celebrate the freshest flavors around.”

Thanks to “widgets,” self-contained mini programs you just paste into sections of your website, you can keep your homepage dynamic and fresh with new content that gets posted to there, perhaps via a social media update. Feedburner ([feedburner.com](http://feedburner.com)) is a tool that can be used to automatically repost your social media post to your website page.

For those who might just be starting out and don't have an existing website, the following companies offer the ability to modify easy-to-use templates and customize them for your business; there are many other options as well. If you have some computer experience, the intuitive nature of the websites make them easy to navigate, and instructional videos will guide you through the design, so there's no programming or “coding” involved. The websites do have some space and creative limitations and may come with small ads that also appear on your website. But for most first-timers, you'll be amazed by the results. Just register for the website template you like the best and start uploading text and photos. There's plenty of free storage space.

- [wordpress.com](http://wordpress.com)

This is the leading blogging interface that can be adapted easily as a business website. If you love writing about your products, ingredients or journey as a food entrepreneur, this option will be particularly attractive.

- [wix.com](http://wix.com)

Containing numerous templates, many product oriented, this online website builder focuses on easy drag-and-drop design elements. Stick to their HTML5 options, since more and more people are viewing websites via their mobile smartphones, so you want to make sure your website looks okay on these tiny devices, too.

- [weebly.com](http://weebly.com)

A very basic, visuals-driven website design interface. Not many bells and whistles, but its simplicity will appeal to less tech-savvy people and get you quickly set up on the Internet.

- [sites.google.com](http://sites.google.com)

Created by the most widely used Internet search engine company, Google Sites provides the ability to create a free website with various features. If you like to write regularly, then you can use Google's [blogspot.com](http://blogspot.com).

- Social media

Everything you do is about sharing your story, your farm and what makes your on-farm dining experience so special. Don't overlook ways to let your customers do this for you as well. To build awareness around your events, you'll need to get people to try it, love it and share what they like about it with the rest of the world. With the explosive growth of the Internet — plus access to it through computers, mobile phones and tablets — social media have become an

increasingly important part of an advertising campaign. And it need not cost you a penny to get started.

Thanks to the proliferation of social media, there are lots of options for sharing your story with the world, in characters, updates, photos and video. The multiplier-effect cannot be overstated. But it does require a different *modus operandi*, where talking becomes typing and a printed poster becomes a “folder” of incredible photos of your products, your home kitchen and your customers savoring a bite of what you’ve produced. Because there aren’t enough hours in the day to do them all, carefully select the social media your customers use most.

The more your customers rave about your events to others on the Internet, the better. People who love your product can, in spirit, be your “in-house” advertising agency. They can tell their friends, share links to your products on Facebook and tweet about their favorites, too.

Facebook: [facebook.com](http://facebook.com)

Currently, the dominant social media networking service, where you can keep connected to your customers and share regular social updates, such as what’s on the menu and descriptions of the pizzas you’ll be serving this week. When you start your Facebook page for your venture, be sure to select and create a “business” profile, not a “personal” page. This keeps your business professional and opens up opportunities you won’t have on your personal page, including the ability to schedule posts in advance, assign other people as administrators (to help you), access analytic tools and implement targeted advertising campaigns, if you choose to do so down the line.

Google+: [google.com/+business](http://google.com/+business)

This search engine giant likewise has ambitions to thrive in the social media world through Google-plus for business.

Twitter: [twitter.com](http://twitter.com)

If you like texting, then this online microblogging website is perfect for sharing what’s happening with your business in 140 characters or less.

Pinterest: [pinterest.com](http://pinterest.com)

Think cork bulletin board with photos, embedded on an Internet page. This pinboard-style website can spread images of your events through the Internet if your photos are beautiful enough.

Instagram: [instagram.com](http://instagram.com)

Like Twitter, except what you share is snapshots, not text. Instagram currently only works with mobile devices.

Just because you have 742 Facebook “friends” doesn’t mean these friends see every “status update” you post. Make no mistake, not only are Facebook and other social media sites mining personal information about you and your online life, they’re making money off you, too. In fact, if you have your “cookies” disabled on your browser, you cannot even sign in to use the site; cookies track everything you do. Facebook and many other social media companies have proprietary and secret algorithms they use to control how many people see your updates.

If you want to boost your reach and increase your audience on social media, you have to pay for it. This is called “pay-for-clicks.” You can focus on people who “like” your page and their friends, or broaden your reach to people you target. Right on their main business page, the social media site will show you how you can increase your reach and how much it will cost you; heck, they even create a sample advertisement out of the content you just provided.

All you have to do is enter your credit card and set your parameters, including your budget, target market and duration of the campaign. Then with a click of a button your ad will reach a segment of the population so specific that it’s a bit creepy, at least to us. The good news, however, is you can effectively target a market at a potentially very low cost; your update will show up in their “news feed.”

- Press release

Most magazines work ahead from three to six months (or more) when covering a story. Newspapers work a week ahead. Don’t forget about local radio, since people interact with the media in many ways. Those who watch lots of TV may not regularly listen to the radio. Internet media, like food bloggers, are always eager to cover stories; plus, their blogs can sometimes go viral, which means what they write gets picked up, over and over again, by other bloggers.

- Listing on Free Directories

Submit your farm and related farm events to a variety of free listings. Some of these may not have a specific “on-farm food event” category but will list farm operations where you can draw out more detail on your event in the description text.

Minnesota directories:

Minnesota Grown

[www.minnesotagrown.com](http://www.minnesotagrown.com)

Directory covers all regions of Minnesota: northwest, northeast, southwest, southeast, and Twin Cities metro area

Local Food Partnership

Northwest Minnesota Regional Sustainable Development Partnership, University of Minnesota

[www.localfoods.umn.edu](http://www.localfoods.umn.edu)

- One-stop shop to connect the University and Community resources to strengthen local food economies. Includes a searchable map of local foods producers and processors where you can get listed. ]

Comment [JJ5]: I don’t know how up to date this is. Jane might know.

Comment [JI6]: Thanks! Please add any updates/additional MN specific resources

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Superior Grown  
[www.superiorgrown.org](http://www.superiorgrown.org)  
Directory covers the Lake Superior basin area of northeast Minnesota and northwest Wisconsin.

National

LocalHarvest  
[localharvest.org](http://localharvest.org)  
Farms with food products for sale

Agrilicious  
[www.agrilicious.com](http://www.agrilicious.com)  
For all things local food, connecting potential customers, farmers and food-related businesses.

Green People  
[www.greenpeople.org](http://www.greenpeople.org)  
Create a listing for your farm

Eat Well Guide: [eatwellguide.org](http://eatwellguide.org)  
Go to “suggest a listing” and suggest your farm.

CSA Center: [csacenter.org](http://csacenter.org)  
Only for farms operating with the community supported agriculture model (Robyn Van En Center).

- Joining different organizations and associations  
Connecting with and joining groups that work with the foodie and travel target you want to connect with can be very economical ways of outreach:

Green Routes: [www.greenroutes.org](http://www.greenroutes.org)  
A sustainable travel initiative coordinated by Renewing the Countryside that promotes and supports unique, locally owned and environmentally conscious travel destinations as a strategy for building strong rural communities.

Explore Minnesota: [www.exploreminnesota.com](http://www.exploreminnesota.com) or [industry.exploreminnesota.com](http://industry.exploreminnesota.com)  
Minnesota’s state tourism agency and industry advocate. Explore Minnesota works to market tourism opportunities of all sizes and scales for Minnesotans and others interested in visiting.

- Paid advertising

If you are going to pay for advertising, make sure you've exhausted your free options first. Remember the ideal scenario is for a media outlet to do a story on you or run your press release. Not only does this save you money, but also there is a legitimacy factor when something appears as an actual article or news story versus a paid advertisement.

That said, sometimes paying for an occasional ad in a local outlet like your community newspaper does more than just get the word out: you're also helping support and collaborate with these, at times, struggling small-town media venues. Some on-farm food business, grateful for the local coverage their local newspaper has given their farm business over the years, see paid advertisement as [a good investment in their local community](#).

### Determine key logistics

Putting together an on-farm food event brings together a list of to-dos and things to think about. Some key categories to consider in planning your venture:

- Farm and food service atmosphere

What type of atmosphere and environment do you want to convey at your events? Would additional entertainment or a musical performance enhance the experience? Once you start attracting a crowd and following, there may be enough volume that a performer or musician might be willing to play for tips alone, adding ambiance but not taking from your bottom line.

- Hours

How long will your event be? When will you start and end? Remember there's a seasonality factor to event timing too, with nightfall earlier as you move into the fall. Will you have adequate lighting available?

- Pricing

The best way to determine pricing is via the classic business model – [determine](#) your input and ingredient costs and then add in your profit margin. Remember to calculate a fair value of the ingredients you raise yourself: If you were to purchase those organic heirloom tomatoes, how much would they cost? [And don't forget to value your time](#). Generally, pizzas (16-18 inches; serves 2-3) range from \$18 - \$25 depending on toppings. Farm-to-Table dinner pricing vary on what's included and the formality involved, with \$0 to \$75 for more informal picnic-style gatherings and \$100 to \$200 or more for the higher-end, white tablecloth affairs.

- Payment systems

Cash is always an easy option. [In that case, it is](#) easiest to price your items at a number requiring little or nominal change (i.e., \$20 per pizza). Checks are also a simple payment method but less folks have checks with them nowadays given increasing electronic payment options. [Remember to add in sales tax \(See Chapter 4/Page ## for more detail on sales tax\)](#).

Credit and debit cards, thanks to their convenience and widespread use, have become the de

**Comment [JJ7] :** Should we mention sales tax here and refer to the section in Rachel's chapters?

**Comment [JI8] :** Made Jan's change per above.

facto way people pay for things. The good news is today you don't need a full-blown merchant account with cumbersome contracts and expensive scanning machines to accept a credit card payment. The following are some of the many credit card-processing options where you only pay a nominal fee based on a percentage of the charge. Thanks to the proliferation of mobile devices, smartphones and computers, plus Internet or cellular connections, processing credit cards has become easier and more widespread. Most companies offering "card readers," small devices that can read a swiped credit card, also provide an option to manually key in the credit card number, but charge a higher percentage fee and fixed transaction cost for this feature.

PayPal: PayPal.com

Among the most widely used, secure and safe ways to receive payment via credit cards or through someone's PayPal account via the computer, tablet or smartphone. No contracts or monthly service fees; just a percentage fee and a charge deducted for each transaction completed. PayPal offers a mobile app and card reader for payments on the go.

Square: Squareup.com

Using a free Square device that plugs into the phone jack on your smartphone, tablet or computer, you can swipe the card and complete your checkout from just about anywhere.

Spark Pay: sparkpay.com

The free card reader from Capital One Bank can process credit cards on a smartphone, tablet or computer using wireless and mobile devices.

- Reservation and ordering system

Determine how to best manage orders to not keep hungry customers waiting. Services like Brown Paper Tickets ([www.brownpapertickets.com](http://www.brownpapertickets.com)) enable you to sell online tickets for a nominal service fee. While this system works well for more formal events and full farm-to-table meals, pizza nights tend to be more casual and most operate where customers order on-site. Clearly communicating on your website that, during peak times, you may wait up to an hour (or whatever your time frame may be) gives folks a heads-up on scheduling (or bringing snacks if needed!)

- Clear signage

For both safety and smooth event logistics, clear signage is a must. You don't want everyone asking you personally where the bathroom is. Clear directional signage on where to park is helpful; ideally you have a mowed field or other room on your property for cars to park. If there is a need to park on the road, remind guests to park fully off the road for safety.

- Cross-promotions with other local businesses

As your business grows, there's much opportunity to cross-pollinate and cooperatively support other local businesses; a true "win win" situation. As some of your customers may be traveling longer distances to your place and lingering into the evening, local lodging connections are helpful. Especially if you're bringing traffic in on a slower weeknight, perhaps area lodging

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establishments would offer a discount for attendees to your events; a win-win for everyone involved. If you purchase ingredients from other area food artisans like cheesemakers, put out information on their products along with information on how to purchase and again, perhaps a promotional incentive or coupon.

