

## **Direct Marketing Workshops for Alabama Black Belt Producers**

### **Educational Objectives**

Statistics published from USDA Economic Research Service indicate farm businesses with direct marketing sales had great rates of survival than those with no direct sales during the same time-period. The period studied was between 2007 and 2012 and included businesses as small as \$10,000 sales and below, up to \$250,000 + annual sales per year. This coupled with previous Extension workshops in which producers indicated they would like additional information on how to market their products, our educational objective was to provide producers with tips, information, and resources to successfully market the products they grow.

In Extension, we put lots of emphasis on growing a successful product but sometimes there is less thought and emphasis on getting that product into the hands of our customers. There are numerous ways to market what we are growing and with the increased interest in local foods, farmers markets, and direct marketing we thought it was a great opportunity to reach our producers and provide meaningful, timely education. Because it would be difficult to cover everything related to marketing we decided on a) marketing concepts b) creating good market displays c) farmers market regulations d) food safety e) accepting SNAP vouchers and f) social media.

We decided to have workshops in the Black Belt region of Alabama where producers are typically smaller, underserved and had previously indicated they would like to receive marketing information.

### **Program Activities**

The program was designed as a mid-day workshop between the hours of 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. We provided the participants lunch and program materials for them to enjoy and stay engaged in the program. As stated, our topics covered were a) marketing concepts b) creating good market displays c) farmers market regulations d) food safety e) accepting SNAP vouchers and f) social media.

One component to highlight was USDA Food and Nutrition Service providing information for producers to apply and accept SNAP vouchers at their farmers market or farm stand. We felt this was an important component as the Black Belt area we were targeting can sometimes have high percentages of citizens who are SNAP eligible. This can be a significant source of revenue for farms if they can apply, accept and market to SNAP program participants who spend their benefits purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables. Although someone from the regional SNAP office in Georgia was supposed to present and run participants through the application process, scheduling conflicts did not allow them to come so they sent us information and we showed participants how to run through the application process.

Additionally, because sometimes in that area it can be a challenge drawing enough participants to hold a class, we encouraged producers to sign up by having promotional items for them to have and use after attending the class. We worked with a sign and marketing company to produce several items for us. They were an 18" x 24" magnet promoting 'Fresh Local Produce', plastic produce bags with the same 'Fresh Local Produce' logo and miniature chalkboards to help them price and promote their products.

Lastly, when we finish the classes (one more in March 2018), we will give the participants a four-month window to use the marketing information and we will follow up with them through short conversations, emails, and surveys to find out how what impact the marketing information had for them.

### **Teaching Methods**

Each program was held in either a local Extension office or public building. The information was presented in lecture, classroom style format with dialogue between presenters and participants as topics were presented. Presentations typically lasted 45 minutes in order to keep the program a reasonable length and knowing that participants would likely need to follow up with agents to get more in-depth information. We provided participants with surveys following the program to gauge if the class had the intended effect. Because it can be biased and is such a short time after receiving the information, we also plan to follow up with the participants roughly four months following to see what information they used. It needed to be four months to comply with the program requirements of a grant associated with the project but also they will have gone through most of their growing and marketing season and it being fresh what marketing tips, techniques, resources, etc. they used during the season.

### **Results**

The sessions have averaged 18 participants per location and although all the planned classes have not quite finished yet, the feedback has been very positive. Anecdotally and through surveys participants responded that they enjoyed the classes, appreciated both the information and promotional items and think that it will help them in their operations. For instance, the survey question "I have a greater understanding of direct marketing", 97% of respondents said they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed', and to the question "I have a greater understanding of marketing strategies that can be used on my farm", 93% of respondents 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed'. In free response sections of the surveys attendees commented, "Keep it coming. I learn(ed) a lot", "Everything was great", "I enjoyed (the) workshop. I learned a lot. Thank you", and "Overall, this was a great workshop & more should have attended". We will not have the full results until we finish the classes, compile the rest of the surveys and even follow up with all attendees toward the end of the 2018 growing season but we were very encouraged by initial results and felt like the program warranted talking about and consideration for further educational programs.

### **Impact Statement**

One of our follow-up questions to producers is going to be how much they thought the information improved their marketing efforts this year. Although not an easy thing to calculate, 100% of respondents indicated they “Will use the information provided today to improve their profits/savings” so we will be interested to see if they saw a noticeable monetary difference. Regardless of the response to the follow-up survey, later this month we anticipate we’ll have educated over 100 producers in the state on marketing techniques and whether we can estimate its exact impact, we know they attended and (ideally) received good information.

### **Evaluation**

Survey responses indicate attendees readily received the information, enjoyed the program and would like to see more in this area. We are pleased that it seemed to meet an audience need and hope that we can continue programming. Finalizing this series will help us know in which direction we should develop further materials but our hope is that producers of Alabama will benefit from these workshops and that we have opportunity to meet with them further.

**References:** USDA, Economic Research Service using data from USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Census of Agriculture, 2007, 2012.