ONE OF A SERIES OF FACT SHEETS ON MARKETING LOCAL FOOD

Online Strategies for Direct Farm Marketers

DEVELOP A WEB PRESENCE

Farmers who market and sell products directly to their customers may consider an online presence unnecessary because their business is usually done face-to-face. However, a web presence offers two big advantages to these"direct farm marketers"– it helps new customers find them and enables them to better serve existing customers. A web presense may simply make contact information available to customers or provide details about growing practices that are hard to explain in 5-minute conversations at CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) dropsites or farmers' market stalls.

Pew Research recently found that 85 percent of all adult Americans use the Internet and 78 percent of regular Internet users research products and services online before purchase. What's more, 91 percent of Internet users consult search engines at least occasionally (Pew, 2012). The numbers say it all: If you are a direct farm marketer, you need a web presense so customers can find and learn more about you.

This fact sheet outlines options to start creating a web presence for your farm business; they include: (1) getting listed in local food directories, such as University of Minnesota Local Foods, Local Harvest, and Local Dirt, (2) launching your own website using free and easy tools, and (3) engaging with customers and potential customers through social media, such as Facebook and blogs.

CREATE COMPELLING CONTENT

Farms are natural sources of interesting stories and visuals that can be posted on the Web in the form of text, photos or videos. Not limited only to photos of adorable baby livestock and beautiful pastoral landscapes, many growers also post stories about their operations and news from their farms on their websites. Other popular content on farm websites include profiles of the growers themselves, as well as workers and suppliers; how-to articles; "behind-the-scenes" features on operations; and news about current events, such as how the farm survived yet another hailstorm this season.

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Compelling content helps forge a bond between grower and customer. In marketing, telling a good story requires differentiating yourself and your products using key words and phrases. But a recent study of listings in the Minnesota Grown Directory, which lists growers and farms that sell products directly to customers, observed that only a minority use more than one keyword or phrase to set themselves and their operation apart (Perbix, n.d.). Instead most farms listed products available for sale instead of employing descriptive phases about their products or operations such as “family owned and operated,” “heirloom,” or “chemical free.” As the Internet increases competition, it's more important than ever to communicate in a way that makes your operation stand out from the crowd.

Example of a ‘how-to’ blog entry from www.tinyfarmblog.com

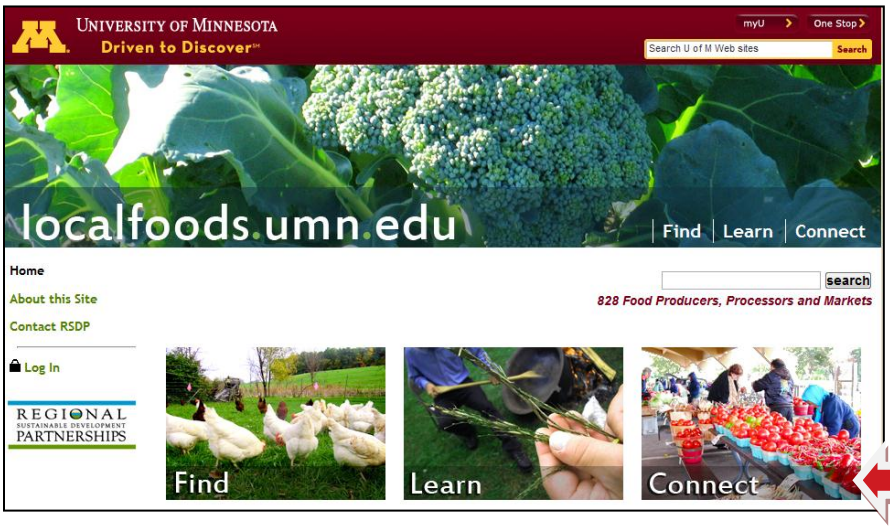
Before creating content, peruse other farm websites to get ideas. Then start brainstorming with friends and colleagues. Challenge yourself to get creative, but remain realistic about content you can produce yourself. Shooting an epic movie about your farm is too ambitious, but taking some snapshots throughout the season is doable. Since taking even a quick photo can disrupt pressing farm work, lay out a sensible plan for balancing operational and marketing activities. Don't postpone taking pictures or writing updates too long, though, because an out-of-date web presence can damage your image. And don't forget the basics. Make sure your most important content, including contact information, location, and operating hours, is prominent and easily found online.

LIST YOUR FARM IN WEB DIRECTORIES

The simplest way to establish a web presence is to add your farm to online directories. An online directory compiles many business listings on one website. Listing your operation on an established website is easy to do, and you get the benefit of being found quickly by major search engines like Google. Some directories charge a fee for inclusion, such as Minnesota Grown, sponsored by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. Other directories, such as Twin Cities-based Simple, Good and Tasty, offer free listings. Following are three more free directories on which you may list yourself.

University of Minnesota Local Foods: http://localfoods.umn.edu/

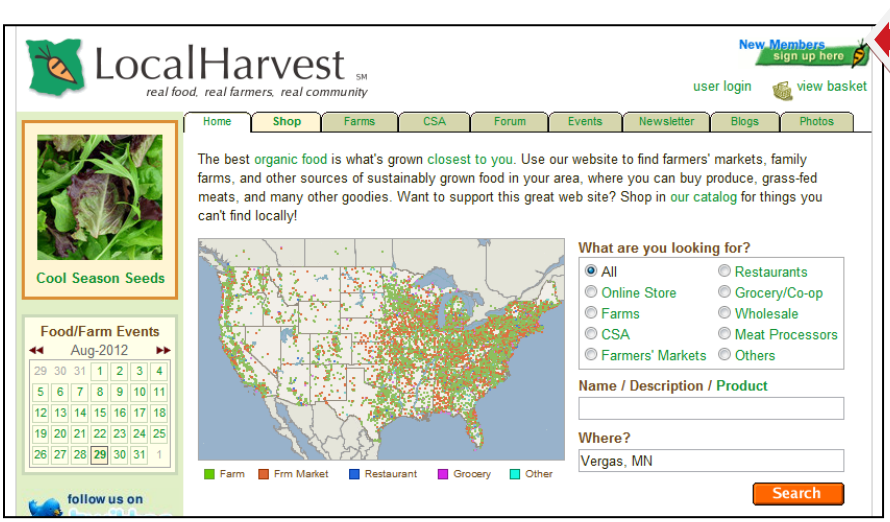
Launched in 2004 as a way to build partnerships and increase the sale of local foods in Northwest Minnesota, the University of Minnesota Local Foods website now includes a directory of farmers and other local food sources throughout the entire state. Joining and creating a profile on the site is free.



Click "Connect" to join the site and follow the prompts to create a profile

Local Harvest: www.localharvest.org

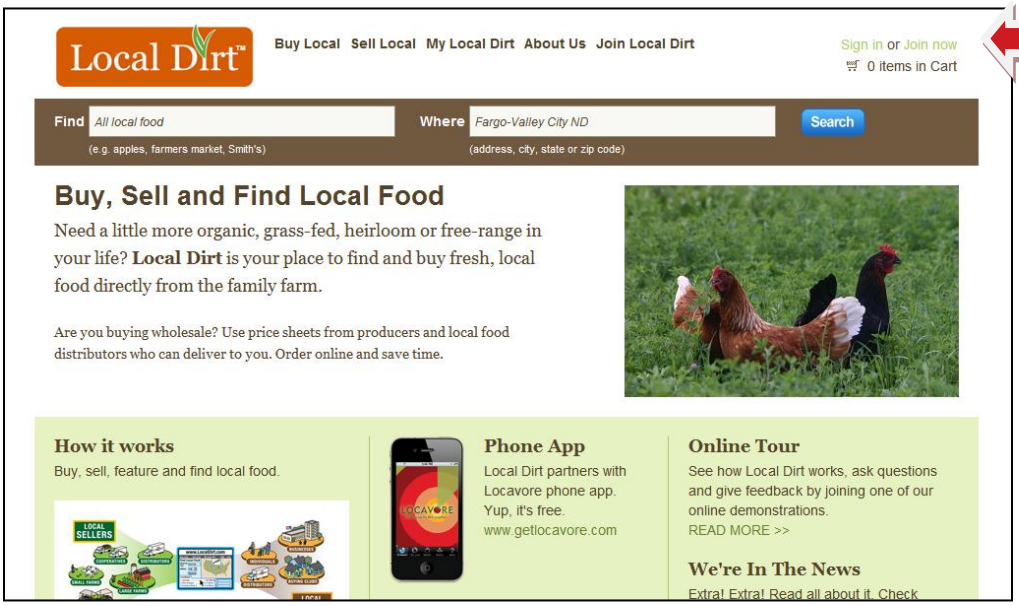
Operated by a California-based non-profit organization, Local Harvest maintains a nationwide directory of small farms, farmers markets, and other local food sources. Obtaining a listing is free, but like all non-profits, Local Harvest operates on donations and solicits support when members create an account. While local farmers listed in Local Harvest's directory focus on selling fresh produce and meats directly to their local communities, some also offer products via mail order through the website's online store if they wish.



Click "Sign up here" to become a member

Local Dirt: www.localdirt.com

Local Dirt acts as both a nationwide directory to connect local farmers with customers in their communities, as well as an online ordering system where farmers can sell individual products for pickup or delivery. Profiles and products listed on Local Dirt will also show up on a mobile app called Locavore, a location-based tool that smartphone users can tap to more easily find locally grown foods in season.



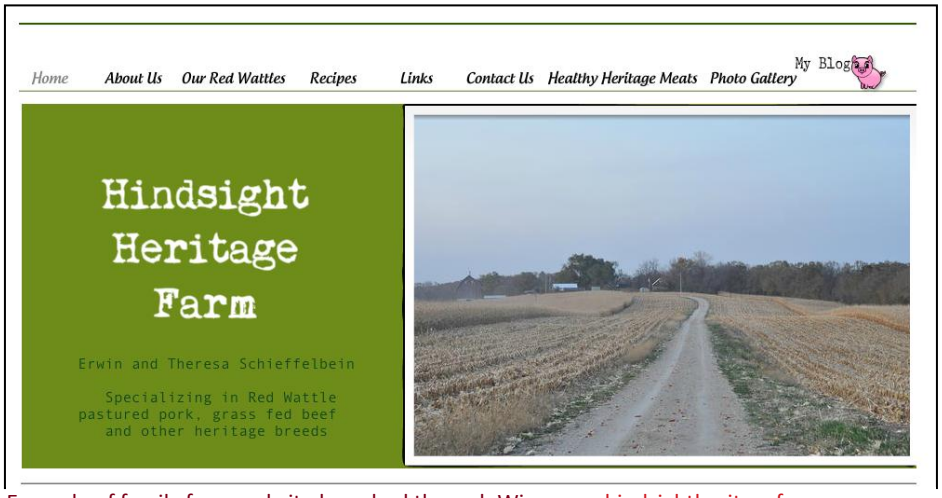
Click "Join now" to get started

LAUNCH A WEBSITE

Another way to establish a web presence is to build your own website. In the past, this typically meant hiring a web designer or spending a lot of time learning software. Today, however, websites come in many forms, including some that are simple for a beginner to build.

Set up a basic website: Wix

You can spend money to hire a company to build and host your website, but you can do those things for free with services like Wix. This online tool lets you easily construct your own basic website by dropping and dragging components into place.



Example of family farm website launched through Wix: www.hindsightheritagefarm.com

Basic websites often serve as the main web presence for small businesses, providing information such as location, hours of operation, contact information, and brief descriptions of products

and services. When launching a website, it's important to keep "Contact Us" information front and center instead of buried at the bottom. Many farmers display their contact information prominently on their home page (see example).

To get started with Wix, sign up for an account at www.wix.com and choose a template (a set format or "look") into which you add your own content, including text, pictures, and video. Once your website is up and running, include the address in all advertising and marketing materials, as well as emails and other correspondence.

Besides Wix, other free services for establishing a website are www.weebly.com and www.webs.com among many others.

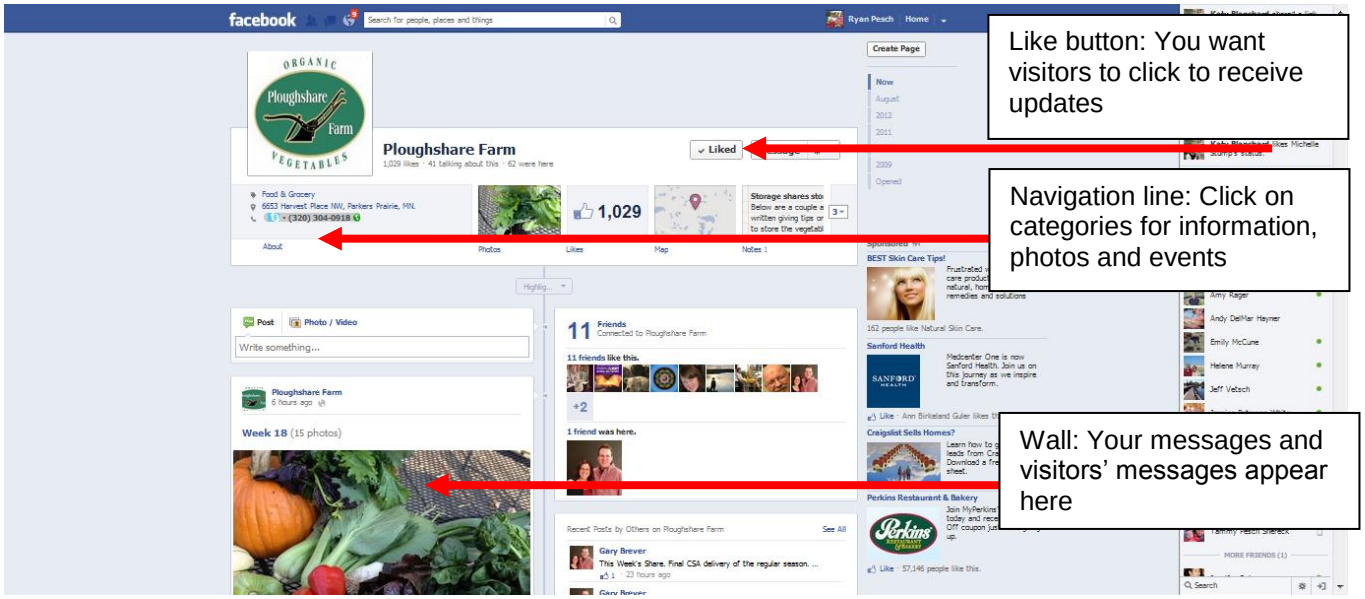
ENGAGE IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Use word-of-mouth promotion: Facebook Business Page

Today nearly164 million Americans have a Facebook account that they use to keep in touch with family and friends, as well as"follow"all kinds of things—including businesses.

As a result, many businesses have launched their own Facebook pages to connect with customers. The idea is to share insights, spread the word about sales and deals, and pose provocative questions that inspire followers to spread the word about your business to their network of family and friends on Facebook. This is old-fashioned word-of-mouth advertising, but online.

Facebook business pages have the same look and offer many of the same features as personal Facebook pages (see example below). Facebook allows users to establish a business page at no charge.

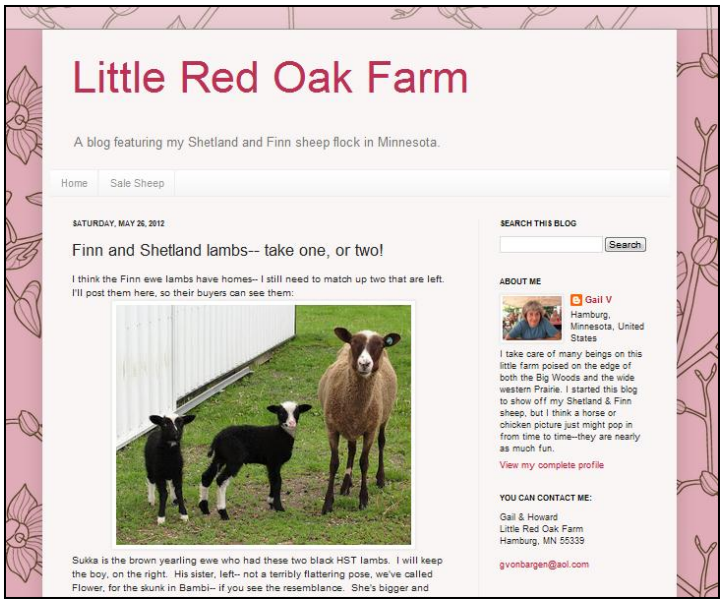


Example of family farm business page on Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/ploughshare

If you already have a personal Facebook page, you can simply add a business page to your account and can login the same as you do now. If you are new to Facebook, you need to create an account. To get started, go to www.facebook.com/pages/create.php and follow the prompts.

Tell your farm story online: Blogs

"Blog" is short for "web log" – an online journal organized by day of entry. A favorite tool of many growers, a blog allows them to showcase the personal and seasonal nature of direct market farms. Research shows that customers value the relationship with a grower (Hinrichs, 2000), and the journal format helps cement this relationship. Some farms employ blogs as their only website, while others use blogs to drive traffic to their primary website.



Example of a family farm blog created in Blogger: http://littleredoakfarm.blogspot.com

Like simple website programs, blog software is easy to use, maintain, and update. You can create a blog and start posting entries within minutes. You also can interact with customers via their comments on your blog (see example). Commitment is critical to blogging. If you begin a blog, you must update it regularly and in a timely manner. Otherwise, readers will think your blog is out of date and stop reading it.

There are two major free blog providers today:

1) Blogger at http://www.blogger.com, and

2) Word Press at http://www.wordpress.com.

Each offers pre-designed templates and the ability to create a blog with your own look and feel. To get started, visit Blogger or Word Press and follow the prompts to create an account and set up your blog page.

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