

Hands-On Workshops: Alternative Marketing Approaches and Distribution Channels

Larry Lev (Oregon – Professional Development Program Grant)

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Title: Hands-On Workshops: Alternative Marketing Approaches and Distribution Channels

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Larry Thompson, left, a grower and marketer from Damascus, educates a workshop group.

Situation:

In the face of globalizing agricultural marketing systems, many small and medium farms and ranches are turning to alternative marketing approaches, all of which carry elements of both risk and promise. Among these approaches are:

- Farmers markets
- CSA (community supported agriculture) farms
- Direct sales to restaurants, institutions and retail stores
- Value-added production
- Product differentiation by location (buy local campaigns)
- Product differentiation by method (for example, eco-labels)

While many agricultural professionals are ideally positioned to play key roles in exploiting these potential marketing approaches, many continue their traditional focus on production issues. And those with some exposure have limited experience and often work in isolation.

Providing workshops that give agricultural professionals hands-on experience and training could help to fill in knowledge gaps and foster more encouragement of successful alternative marketing.



The agricultural professionals visited several farmers markets.



Participants engaged in debriefing conversations at the end of each day to discuss what they had learned and observed.

Objectives:

1. Increase workshop participants' knowledge of, and improve their attitudes toward, alternative marketing approaches and distribution channels
2. Provide workshop participants with a set of skills that will enable them to deliver engaging outreach programs to producers considering these enterprises
3. Develop a users guide to existing, underutilized alternative marketing resources and an educational design template, both available electronically

Actions:

Portland, Oregon, which has a long and successful history of innovations in food marketing, was selected as the ideal setting to conduct two three-day hands-on workshops. Participants were selected through an application process that enlisted professionals representing a wide range of ag support organizations, including extension, NRCS and other USDA agencies, state departments of agriculture and NGOs.

The first workshop, in September 2006, attracted 16 participants from eight states. The second, in September 2007 (not an extension but a replicate of the first), was attended by 16 participants from eight states. Combined, the workshops included attendees from 11 states.

Before each workshop, project coordinators distributed to participants a packet of 11 resource materials, explaining how each could be integrated into educational programming. Topics included small farm management, direct marketing, sustainable and certified production, Rapid Market Assessment, farmers markets, certification and labeling and profiles of innovative farm marketers.

Participants were given pre-workshop homework assignments two weeks ahead, prompting them to visit via the Internet nearly 20 people and institutions to be featured during the three days of the workshops.

The workshop agenda included visits to farms and farmers markets, panels and presentations, experience with Rapid Market Assessment and daily debriefing sessions to focus on what was learned and observed.



Participants in the 2007 alternative marketing workshop.

Outcomes and Impacts:

Surveys were conducted pre and immediate-post workshop to measure changes in attitude and understanding and six months after the workshop to measure changes in activities conducted.

As a result of the workshops, all participants reported an increase in enthusiasm for working on the topic of alternative marketing systems and in their knowledge of different alternatives. This increase is particularly significant because many participants had been more focused on production than on marketing. They also expressed a greater appreciation for the breadth and complexity of the food systems they observed.

The post-conference survey showed that:

- 12 of the 32 participants said that they had made use of the quantitative and qualitative research methods demonstrated during the workshop
- 15 had made use of the materials in educational workshops they had subsequently designed and presented
- 19 had drawn on other workshop participants in the six months after the workshop
- 17 said the workshop inspired them to search and network with others in their home region



Participants in the 2006 alternative marketing workshop.

Potential Contributions:

Local and regional marketing systems are more complex than most agricultural professionals and producers recognize. Well organized educational explorations of these systems serve a vital role in leading to their improvement.

Specific tools such as Rapid Market Assessment of farmers markets and farmer-chef connections can be easily adapted for use in other geographic regions. All activities that facilitate networking and easier exchange of information are also important.



The workshops included a Rapid Market Assessment at farmers markets.



Shari Raider of Sauvie Island Organics discusses marketing techniques used on the farm.