

Selling Strategies for Local Food Producers

Division of Applied Social Sciences

For many farmers, marketing and selling their products are the most challenging parts of the farm enterprise, especially when selling directly to consumers. However, direct markets for fresh and unique food products are among the most rapidly growing farm opportunities. People around the country are looking to buy tasty, healthy food directly from farmers — farmers with whom they can talk, ask questions and build relationships. However, these new market opportunities, particularly in farmers' markets, community supported agriculture (CSA), roadside stands, restaurants and cooperatives, require expertise in selling as well as marketing, production and financial management.

In any business, marketing and selling go hand in hand. Marketing describes a range of activities that include deciding what to produce and how to price, distribute and promote a product. Selling, on the other hand, describes the techniques used to entice buyers to exchange their cash for the seller's products. Despite the images that many people hold of pushy "salesmen" who won't take no for an answer, or the "natural-born salesman" who gets people to buy products without much effort, developing strong selling skills is critically important to acquiring and keeping customers in a direct marketing enterprise. And, while many farmers may be intimidated by the idea of selling, it is important to remember that selling skills — just like other skills — can be learned.

The selling techniques described in this guide are customer-friendly and ethical. There is no advice on how to trick or manipulate customers, or how to get customers to buy something they don't really need. Rather, the guide provides practical advice on how to



Checklist: Are you ready to sell?

Being prepared to sell is essential. You should have the basics covered before you open for business or make a sales call.

- Product quality:** Is your product fresh, clean and ready for sale? Are samples prepared?
- Price:** Is your product priced fairly and competitively? Is your price list accurate and up-to-date?
- Display:** Is your display neat, accessible and attractive? Are prices clearly marked? Is the name of your farm displayed on boxes, banners or signs?
- Supplies:** Do you have plenty of shopping bags. Do you have enough cash to make change? Is your scale in good working order? Are farm pamphlets and recipes available?
- Personal appearance:** Are you clean, neat, well dressed and well groomed?
- Attitude:** Are you proud of your products and what you do for a living?
- Service:** Are you ready to be personable and helpful? Do you have a plan for handling complaints? Do you have a good invoice system?
- Gratitude:** Are you thankful for your customers and the opportunity to serve them?

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Understanding nonverbal communication

Waving “Hi” to a neighbor; slouching in a chair; looking intently into the eyes of a loved one. These are all ways that we communicate without using words.

Nonverbal communication takes many forms and can convey diverse meanings. However, its significance is often overlooked. Nonverbal communication can actually convey more meaning than verbal communication. Researchers estimate that at least 60 percent of the impact of a conversation or message comes from nonverbal factors such as eye behavior, gestures, posture and voice.

Your relationships with customers can be enhanced by not only having an awareness of the ways messages are conveyed nonverbally, but by taking steps to improve your nonverbal communication. Consider the following suggestions from *Successful Nonverbal Communication*, by Dale G. Leathers (1986):

- Try to sustain eye contact with customers when serving them or having a conversation with them. Avoid shifting your eyes too much, or looking down or away from customers.
- Keep hands and elbows away from your body. When listening to customers, nod your head and smile. Avoid fidgeting, handwringing and touching your face.
- Keep an open and relaxed posture. Lean forward slightly. Avoid crossing your arms and standing rigidly.
- Speak at an appropriate volume and rate. Vary your pitch. Avoid speaking in a monotone, using too many pauses and “ahs,” and repeating words.

increase sales by building a loyal customer base. The guide is organized around a counselor approach to selling outlined in the book *Win-Win Selling* (Wilson Learning Library, 2003) and takes readers through the process of (1) building relationships with customers, (2) discovering customers’ needs and preferences, (3) being an advocate for one’s products, and (4) providing quality service. While much of the information in this guide is focused on selling at farmers’ markets, the tips are appropriate for anyone wishing to sell their products directly to consumers.

Before you start

Selling is just one part of a successful direct-marketing business. Good production skills and superior postharvest handling techniques can ensure high-quality products that command premium prices. Likewise, a thorough knowledge of your farm’s financial condition can ensure that you employ the right pricing and advertising strategies to gain the most profit.

Being aware that you are competing with supermarkets and other farmers at your market or in your particular region can also help ensure success. At the end of the day, you want customers to spend more of their dollars with you. This means that you have to constantly improve your skills and look for competitive advantages to keep your business profitable.

Although the topics of product quality, farm finan-

cial planning, pricing and merchandizing are beyond the scope of this guide, you can find a host of resources on these topics in the “Resources” section at the end of this publication and through University of Missouri Extension publications and county offices (On the Web: extension.missouri.edu).

Build relationships with your customers

In any business, building relationships with customers is key. This is even more important in the world of direct marketing. However, building relationships with customers takes time and depends on being personable and paying attention to a few basic details. The following suggestions are offered to help you make a good first impression and begin the process of building a loyal base of customers.

First, pay attention to your personal appearance.

Consciously or unconsciously, customers often base their purchasing decisions on their first impression of you. Be clean, neat, well dressed and well groomed. Dirty clothes and hands, stubby beards and unconventional tattoos and piercings can all turn off certain customers. This doesn’t mean you have to wear your Sunday best when selling. On the contrary, a clean pair of blue jeans and a fresh shirt are acceptable attire for farmers. Also consider wearing a name tag or having your farm logo inscribed on shirts and hats.

Second, engage customers as soon as you can at the market so they don’t have the opportunity to go somewhere else. Always stand rather than sit. Make eye contact with customers and avoid wearing sunglasses if possible. Smile. Say “Hello” and “How are you today?” The idea here is to be inviting and make it easy for customers to visit your stand and get to know you both as a farmer and as a person. When customers do visit your stand, make an effort to learn their names and something about them. This allows you to address them by name and strike up casual conversation when they revisit your stand. When working with chefs, do some homework to learn their names before you make



your first sales call. If the market is slow, keep busy by polishing fruit, straightening the stand, or passing out samples, or consider having a partner in front of the stand to draw people in.

Third, be reliable. Show up on time, keep regular hours and have adequate supplies of your product. It is hard for customers to trust you if they don't know when you're going to be at the market, when you're going to arrive with a delivery, how long you'll be open for business or how much product you'll have. If you are trying to sell to a restaurant, reliability is a key factor in gaining and maintaining your customer. For instance, if a hailstorm wipes out your spinach, or deer season closes down your meat processor, make sure to tell the chef as far in advance as possible that you won't be able to deliver their order. With advance warning, chefs may be able to take the lack of product in stride and still continue to order from you. Without it, you may lose the entire account.

Fourth, share your knowledge about your products and skills. Customers are often interested in the nutritional value of different foods, how they are grown or processed, or what makes your offerings special. This is especially important if you sell specialty or ethnic products. Customers also appreciate hearing about how your products are used by other satisfied customers.

Fifth, go the extra mile for customers. Offer to carry or cart-out purchases. Allow customers to leave purchased items at your stand until they've completed their other shopping. Always try to deliver more than the customer expects. Give away something extra or throw in a sample of a new product to regular customers. These and other services demonstrate your commitment to your customers and show them how much you appreciate their business.

Finally, be pragmatic and have a sense of humor. It is guaranteed that you will not satisfy everyone all of the time. Placing reasonable expectations on yourself and others, and being able to laugh at yourself on occasion, will allow you to keep a good attitude and attract customers to your business. Also, if you really don't believe that you are outgoing enough for direct marketing, find someone in your family or hire someone who is. Remember to take the time to educate them about your products and the importance of providing great customer service.

Discover your customers' needs and preferences

Discovering the needs and preferences of customers takes time, patience and a good ear. It also follows naturally from a commitment to building relationships with customers and getting to know them on a more personal level.

For instance, you might arrive at market with a

truckload of the best yellow-fleshed watermelon in the county, but if the customers at your market are not familiar with this variety, then you are likely to *leave* the market with a truckload of yellow-fleshed watermelon.

Finding out what customers want can be achieved in a couple of different ways. First, when talking to customers, ask questions about their preferences. For instance, ask questions such as, "Are you looking for anything special today?" or "Are you preparing any special meals this week?" If a family is shopping with their children, ask the kids, "What's your favorite vegetable?" You can also relate your products to the season or upcoming holidays by asking, "Are you planning to do any canning this year?" or "Will you be cooking out for the Fourth of July?" Listen carefully to what customers say. If you are taking orders, restate the customer's order to be sure you heard them correctly. Keep a notepad and pen nearby to record orders, comments and special requests.

Second, do some homework. Spend time at the library or on the Internet researching the latest consumer trends, particularly by reading lifestyle magazines (e.g., *Martha Stewart Living*, *Oprah*, *Real Simple*). Look for information about the types of products you

Building relationships with chefs

When selling to chefs, it may be even more important to invest time in building strong relationships, in part because you stand to gain or lose a higher volume of sales than with an individual customer at the farmers' market. It can also take more time to establish relationships with chefs. You may have to make 10 or visits or telephone calls to an establishment before the chef starts to take an interest. Being persistent (in a polite way) can pay off.

Once a chef is interested, schedule a meeting well before the start of the season to determine his or her needs. Ask a few questions, such as:

- "What is your favorite meal to prepare?"
- "What are some of your best-selling items?"
- "Are there any products that you would like to source locally?"
- "Are there any hard-to-find or highly perishable products not available from your current distributor?"

Take a seed catalog with you and review it with the chef to determine which products they want. Provide samples of your highest-quality products for the chef to use at home or in the restaurant. Talk about your best-selling products at market and ask the chef if they are interested in the same ones.

When setting up a meeting with a chef, keep in mind that chefs have different schedules than farmers. Chefs are extremely busy during meal times and will not welcome interruptions. If you call on a chef specializing in the lunch business at 11:30 a.m., you will lose the sale. The best time to call or drop by is midmorning, generally before 10 a.m., or in the afternoon, around 2:00 or 3:00 p.m., after the lunchtime rush is over and before the dinner hour starts.

Top 5 annoyances for farmers' market customers

- 1 Vendor takes or makes cell phone calls while serving customers.
- 2 Vendor chats a long while with other vendors or customers who have been helped while others are waiting.
- 3 Long line has formed at the vendor's stand — most customers won't wait.
- 4 Vendor fails to acknowledge waiting customers.
- 5 Vendor cannot make change.

sell. Stay abreast of the latest developments in direct marketing and farming. This information, along with what you learn directly from your customers, can be used to adjust your product selection to better meet your customers' needs.

Be an advocate for your products

Once you've developed a relationship with your customers and have a good idea of what they're looking for, it's time to match their needs with your products. Your goal here is to create a partnership with your customers rather than try to sell them something they don't need.

Try to find a balance between sharing information about your products and socializing with customers while at the market. Talking about the nutritional qualities of your products or how to store, preserve, and use your products is a great way to promote them. With chefs, talk about the ease of using your products in the restaurant, or their unique flavors and qualities. For instance, you might talk about the rich flavor of your grass-fed meat, or how well your egg yolks hold up when frying them sunny-side up. Keep in mind that while most people are interested in receiving some information, they don't necessarily have the time to sit through a lecture at the market or in the restaurant. Keep the conversation light and friendly. Passing out informational fliers is an additional way to share information.

Sharing recipes is another great way to promote your products, especially if they are new or unique. People are generally interested in simple, seasonal recipes with only a few ingredients. Recipes can be gathered in the off-season and printed on tear-off note pads with your farm logo and contact information.

Offering samples is a great way to introduce new or in-season products. When sampling at a farmers' market, be sure to consult with your local health department or the market bylaws regarding sampling rules. Generally, samples should be fresh and served in individual cups on a covered tray. Keep a trash can nearby and always use sanitizing water to clean knives and cutting boards between uses. When providing samples to chefs, take small quantities of your product to the restaurant with some information about your farm.

Try to have a brief conversation with the chef if possible. Check back a week later to see if the chef liked your product and is interested in doing business with you.

Make signs or announcements to let customers know about products that will be available in coming weeks. A simple sign can read, "Fresh shiitake mushrooms available next week. Special price: \$3.00/¼ lb. while supplies last." Or, as customers leave with their purchases, you might say, "Next week we'll have our first harvest of oyster mushrooms. Be sure to visit our stand early because we'll only have a few pounds to begin with." Give customers a reason to visit your booth again and the opportunity to become preferred customers. Also, if you sell many different products, consider offering a weekly special at a reduced price. Everyone likes to feel like they are getting a deal. This information can also be conveyed using signs or announcements. A sign might read, "This Week's Special: Winter Squash, 2 for \$5.00." Or, you might say to customers: "We have a special on #2 canning tomatoes this week. They're slightly blemished but will make great sauce or salsa. Here's a copy of our family's salsa recipe."

Don't be afraid to put a little flair into your presentation. Wear a costume or make periodic announcements to passersby about new or special products. Be sure to use discretion though, and be considerate of other vendors and shoppers.

Finally, remember to ask for the sale. Be specific rather than general. Assume the sale by asking questions that will make a sale regardless of the answer. The best questions include two choices with no negative outcome (i.e., no loss of sale). For example, rather than asking, "Would you like to buy some eggs?" say "Would you like just a dozen eggs this week, or would you like to take an extra dozen to have on hand?" Other examples: "Would you like 2 or 5 pounds of tomatoes today?" "How many pounds of beans can I get for you today?" "Would you like the green peppers or the red peppers or both?" When talking with a chef, you might



ask, “What day of the week would be best for me to deliver your order?”

Assuming the sale can be done subtly. If a customer is wavering between two products, say something like “How about getting the fresh spreadable cheese for using on toast, *and* this aged cheese that you can sprinkle over salads?” In this example, there is a greater chance the customer will buy two items from you, rather than one.

If you ask for the sale and it doesn’t happen, then you may need to make another attempt to discover your customers’ wants and needs. Remember though, to increase your sales, you ultimately must ask for the sale — many sales don’t happen without it!

Creating printed and online materials

Many farmers involved in direct marketing have invested time and energy in communicating with customers through printed and online materials. This is great way for farmers to enhance their relationship with customers and demonstrate the unique qualities of their farm and farm products.

Before starting, consider creating a unique “brand” for your business or product, if you don’t already have one. Combine the name of your farm or a special product name with a unique type style and color scheme to create a logo. Once you’ve created this design and identity, use it consistently on all printed and online materials. Customers are more likely to remember you if you have a strong and consistent identity.

Below are suggestions of different types of materials to consider, many of which can be created using basic word processing or publishing software.

- **Farm pamphlet or brochure:** Include pictures, a farm history, a statement of your farming philosophy, products, and a harvest calendar.
- **Coupons:** Create a double coupon that gives the customer a discount on their next purchase from you, and also includes a discount for one of their friends to purchase from you. Include the coupon with every purchase and vary it from week to week.
- **Weekly or monthly newsletter:** This is a great way to update customers about new products and developments on your farm. Include seasonal recipes, along with food storage and preservation tips.
- **Informational fliers:** Consider creating a ½- to 1-page handout on a range of topics such as nutrition, cooking, storage and preservation tips, classes, events, contests, history and origins of select food crops, relevant news stories and policy issues.
- **Web site:** Take your farm to the Internet and combine all of the options above in one place. However, having a dysfunctional Web site or failing to promptly respond to web requests may be worse than having no Web site at all. If needed, seek help from a professional web designer or web manager.

For assistance with printed materials, marketing, and promotion, contact Lane McConnell, Marketing Specialist, Missouri Department of Agriculture, Telephone: 573-526-4984, or e-mail: Lane.McConnell@mda.mo.gov.

Provide quality service

You may be familiar with the following adage: a *satisfied* customer will tell fewer than five people about your business, but a *dissatisfied* customer will tell at least 10 people. This demonstrates two important points. First, satisfied customers are an essential part of any business. Second, word-of-mouth publicity can make or break a business. With this in mind, it is important to focus on strengthening relationships with existing customers by providing outstanding service.

Once the market opens, serving customers should be the first priority. All other activities, such as conversations with other vendors or rearranging the display, should wait until the customer is served. Also, be sure to thank customers as they leave and make it clear that all products are guaranteed.

Providing prompt service is also important, especially during busy times. However, try to give each customer the time they deserve. Develop a way to serve customers in order and acknowledge customers who are waiting in line. Make eye contact with waiting customers, tell them that you’ll be with them in a moment, and thank them for their patience. If possible, offer waiting customers a sample or a pamphlet about your farm. When selling to chefs or other direct customers, return phone calls within a minimum of 24 hours to avoid losing the sale. Consider hiring employees, recruiting family members or prepackaging items for extremely busy periods.

Address any post-sale dissatisfaction politely and promptly. And, whatever you do, avoid arguing with customers. Acknowledge all complaints, apologize and take appropriate steps to remedy the complaint. It is sometimes helpful to ask customers how they would like a situation resolved. Once the complaint is resolved, thank the customer for bringing the complaint to your attention and make a note of the complaint for future reference. Keep in mind that it takes more energy and effort to gain new customers than it does to keep existing ones. Even when a customer has a negative experience, they will likely return to purchase from you again if they feel their complaint was resolved in an appropriate and timely way.

Providing good service is particularly essential for restaurant customers. Samples can introduce your product to a chef, but they have to be packaged well and contain enough of your product so that the chef can experiment. Good packaging will allow the product to show visibly if possible, will be consistent from package to package, and will be standardized by weight or count, so a chef can confidently order the necessary amount. (While one chef may appreciate receiving great spinach in a black garbage bag, most chefs won’t even open the bag.)

You will also need to include current, easy-to-read price lists with samples and any printed materials you leave with the chef. Price lists can introduce new prod-

Can you learn to be a good salesperson?

Anyone can learn to be a good salesperson. Those who naturally excel at selling will enjoy working with a wide variety of personalities, have excellent interpersonal skills and enjoy thinking creatively about positioning or placing their products. They will pay attention to detail and be comfortable when customers don't want their product or don't return their sales calls.

For others, learning to be a good salesperson may take time and attention. Initially, it may require making an extra effort to be outgoing and start conversations with customers. It might also require a commitment to using the resources in this guide to develop the selling skills needed for a successful direct marketing enterprise.

Additionally, it's important to remember that all farm enterprises require broad sets of skills in production, marketing, financial management and selling. Most farmers shine in one or two areas and struggle with the others — only mythical "Super Farmer" can master all of them. Farmers who know all about producing and harvesting high-quality products, and understand exactly how profitable each of their enterprises is, may be completely intimidated by the idea of marketing and selling their products. Or, someone who knows how to market well and produce great products may find it very challenging to determine which of their crop or livestock enterprises make them the most money.

Because developing expertise in all skill areas is generally not easy, direct marketers should honestly evaluate their talents and skills, take strides to develop broad skills in areas that need improvement and seek help from other farmers, workers or family members who possess expertise in particular areas.

ucts to the chefs, especially if you highlight the variety of products you have available. Part of providing good service is making it easy to order your product. Some chefs will place their orders after their dinner service closes, which means you are likely to lose the sale if you can't take e-mail or Internet orders.

Products will need to be delivered on a regular basis, at predetermined times, when it is convenient for the chef. Since chefs have limited storage on-site, delaying your delivery by even a day can disrupt the restaurant's menu and damage your relationship. You will also need to include a separate, legible invoice with any products you deliver. Invoices are usually passed to the bookkeeper, who has to be able to understand the information to process a timely payment.

Beyond the basics

Although providing outstanding customer service is a proven way to build and strengthen relationships with existing customers, there are additional ways you can improve service.

First, when interacting with customers, find other products to sell them. Take note of what they have in their shopping bags or on their restaurant menus and offer complementary items. Remember their previous

purchases, ask them how they enjoyed those items, and ask if they'd like more. If customers are looking for items you don't carry, recommend other vendors who do carry those items.

If you see a regular customer carrying a competitor's product, offer a sample of your own product with an appropriate promotion to bring them to your stand next week. For instance, "I see you purchased some tomatoes down the way. I've planted this really great variety this year that I think you'll like. Try this one at no charge, and if you like it, come back next week to see me."

Second, consider creative ways to communicate with customers throughout the year. Many farms use newsletters, pamphlets, informational brochures, coupons or handwritten letters to stay in touch with customers. Create a mailing list by collecting customers' contact information from checks or a guest book. Mail printed items or e-mail electronic versions, depending on your customers' preferences.

Third, think about hosting events, classes or contests. An open house or farm tour is a great way to show appreciation for customers. Sponsor free classes on preserving foods. Partner with a local chef to offer tasting parties or cooking classes. Have a drawing or recipe contest.

Finally, make a concerted effort to evaluate and improve your service. Record yourself during busy times with a video or audio recorder. Listen to and watch other vendors. Tour other markets, visit other roadside stands, or go to the supermarket to check their selection, display and prices. Put yourself in the customers' shoes and think about your business from their perspective. Some businesses measure customer satisfaction through customer surveys, meetings with customers, or customer complaints and compliments. The goal is to reflect on both successes and failures and be willing to change.

Summary

Being successful in direct marketing takes a great deal of time, effort and attention. It requires not only the ability to produce a quality product, but also the commitment to build lasting relationships with customers. It also takes a combination of skills, and ideally a group effort, to create a lasting, profitable enterprise.

However, marketing directly to consumers also has many rewards. As a farmer, you are able to gain greater control over both production and marketing decisions. You have the opportunity take advantage of unique marketing opportunities and earn retail prices for your products. You also become a valued member of the community and gain satisfaction from both your work and the relationships you build with community members.

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Web sites, publications, contacts

Food Circles Networking Project is a University of Missouri Extension program that connects farmers and consumers around local food. The project offers guides to sourcing local foods and information on creating community food systems.

Web: foodcircles.missouri.edu

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Web: growingformarket.com
Telephone: 800-307-8949

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Missouri Department of Agriculture AgriMissouri program (Web: www.agrimissouri.com) and Farmers' Market Blog (Web: mofarmersmarket.blogspot.com).

Missouri Farmers' Market Association. c/o Eileen Nichols, PO Box 1, Webb City, Mo. 64870.

The New Farm Organic Price Report. Updated listing of conventional and organic wholesale prices for fruit, vegetables, herbs and grain.

Web: newfarm.org/opx

Networking Association for Farm Direct Marketing and Agritourism. Contact 62 White Loaf Road, Southampton, Mass. 01073.

Web: nafdma.com
Telephone: 888-884-9270

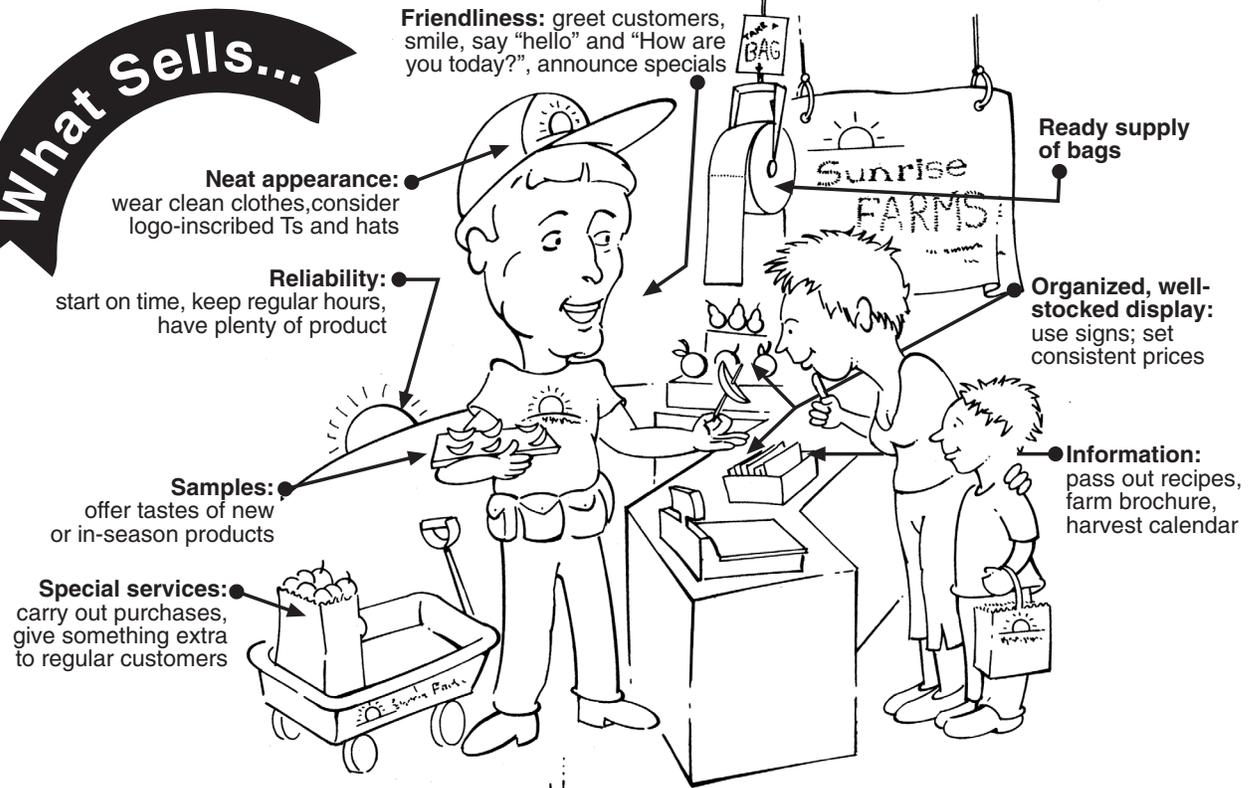
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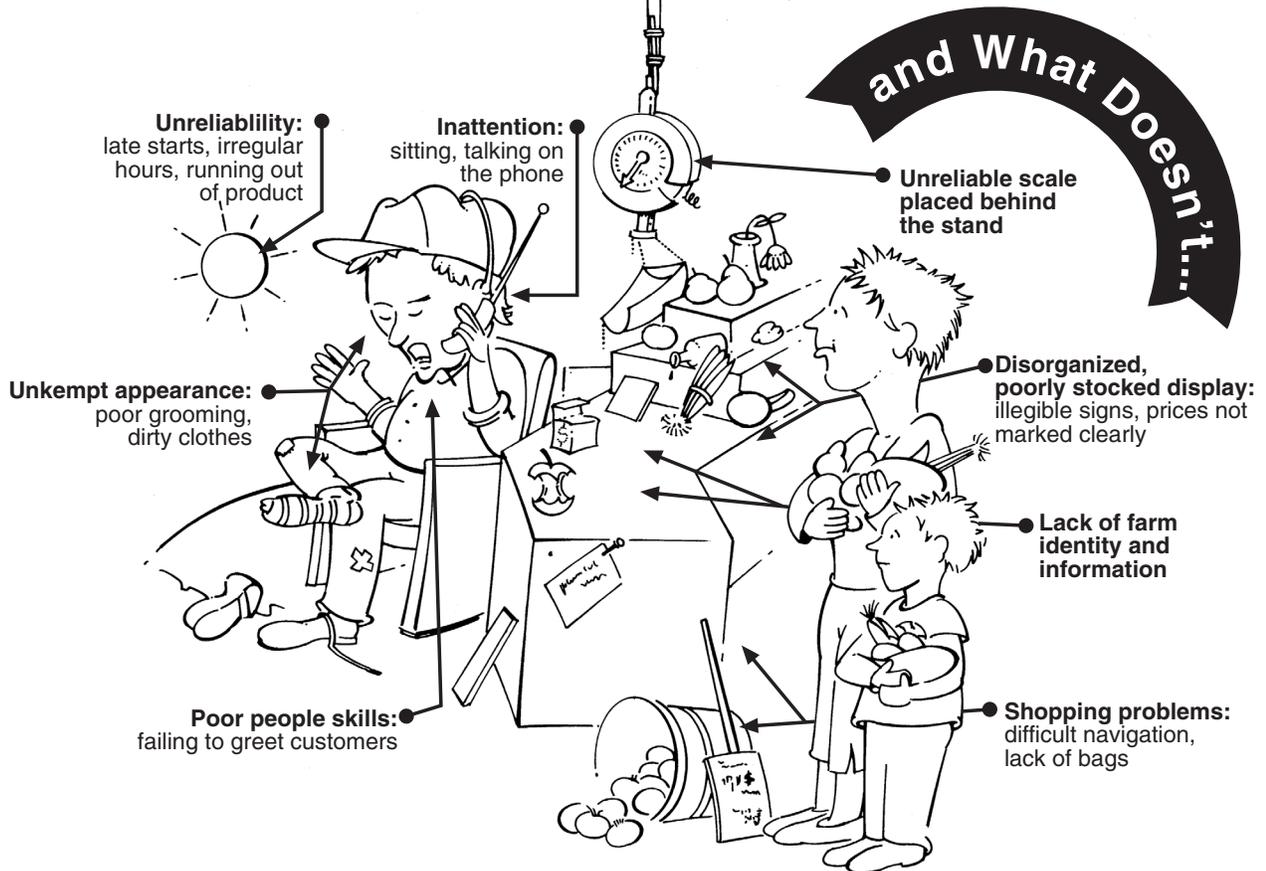
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University of Missouri Extension Publications. Many publications are available for free online at extension.missouri.edu/explore. Others are available for order online at extension.missouri.edu/explore/order.htm, by phone at 573-882-7216 or 800-292-0969, or by mail at 2800 Maguire Blvd., Columbia, Mo. 65211.

What sells...



and What Doesn't...



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