

Regional Agricultural Marketing: A Review of Programs in California



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Executive Summary

Overview

Regional agricultural marketing programs are becoming more common in California. They are important components of localized strategies to increase the economic viability of farmers and their communities, given the challenges associated with current market and population trends. The effective place-based branding of agricultural products has the potential to raise farmer incomes while increasing consumer awareness about the origins of their food.

Regional agricultural marketing programs can exist at many geographical levels, from the scale of the state, to the scale of a county or sub-county region. Point of origin is a critical component of all these campaigns, but those that pertain to a more specific region tend to be strongly based on a sense of place and identity. To this end, branding is the cornerstone of regional marketing, providing a relatively simple way for farmers to differentiate and add value to their products. Most regional marketing programs are more than a logo, however. By increasing consumer awareness of local agriculture, building needed infrastructure, and providing technical expertise, the programs aim to preserve the culture and land in farming, add value to agricultural products, and help local farmers survive.

In order to assess how regional agricultural marketing is faring in California, the University of California Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (UC SAREP) conducted 25 interviews with people connected to agricultural marketing campaigns at various geographical scales, from sub-county to the state level. Contacts for 12 active regional marketing programs and two that no longer exist were interviewed; contacts included member farmers, program directors, farm advisors, and agriculture commissioners, as well as a marketing consultant who contributed to the formation of many of the regional programs. The directors of the statewide *Buy California* Marketing Agreement, the Division of Marketing Services of the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) that administers the agreement, and four of the program's participating commodity boards were interviewed as well. Overall, nine counties and five other multi-county regions were represented. The interview subjects are shown below in relation to their geographical location, as well as three other regional agricultural marketing programs that were identified since the time of interviews.

Results

All of the regional marketing programs interviewed share a central objective to increase local production and consumption of agricultural products. A few groups specifically try to help small-scale growers increase small farm viability. A mutually reinforcing goal is to raise consumer awareness about where their food is coming from, and to facilitate consumer education about local food production. Several groups would like agriculture to be incorporated into economic and open space development strategies, and two aim to enhance the sustainability of local agriculture, specifically by increasing the prevalence of organic practices.

All of the regional marketing programs are voluntary, membership-based associations. Many have obtained 501c3 non-profit status, or are housed within larger organizations that are non-profits themselves. As volunteer organizations, it is common to find a core of dedicated individuals that devote much time and energy to their respective programs. Farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural producers are the core members of regional marketing programs, but a wider range of interests are getting involved in many parts of the state. There is an increasing recognition that consumers, retailers, restaurants, and other businesses are also necessary participants.

The creation of a brand or logo is often the first step in the development of the marketing programs. Logo dissemination and marketing activities are achieved through the sale and distribution of items such as shirts, aprons, hats, magnets, and bags, the use of a website, newsletters, tastings, media coverage, and promotional events. In addition to marketing, many programs also aim to increase the capacities of farmers and growers in the areas of production and marketing. Several groups provide educational opportunities for growers/producers in these skill areas, in the form of farm tours, range walks, ag tourism workshops, marketing strategies workshops, farmer to farmer meetings, etc. Some groups hold workshops for retail partners as well. The cooperation of specialists within University California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) is a major part of these efforts in several counties.

The amount of money used to start the different regional marketing varied greatly, from hundreds of dollars to hundreds of thousands. As a general rule, several interview participants advised groups to first go after local sources of funding whenever possible, and to engage the support of local government or other regional foundations. Marketing groups have received money from non-local sources including the USDA Fund for Rural America, USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) monies, Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF), California Nutrition Network (CNN), and other major foundations.

Representatives spoke of the need for at least one part-time or half-time position to manage organizational, marketing, and membership responsibilities. Depending on the financial resources available, some groups do hire people for these tasks. Membership fee policies of the marketing associations depend upon the demographic characteristics of the region, the goals of the program, and the group's relative length of existence. It is really up to the group to define the membership categories they would like to have, as well as the rights and benefits that the categories entail.

Few respondents could provide concrete measures of program success, largely because of a lack of evaluation efforts. The importance of monitoring the effectiveness

of marketing efforts over time is certainly recognized, but considered difficult and even expensive. A few programs are tracking specific indicators of success to monitor the progress they are making, such as increases in membership and member sales. Much of the evidence is anecdotal, however. Positive feedback from members, increased consumer awareness, media coverage, and greater networking opportunities were also given as examples of success. The outcomes of activities that aim to make positive impacts on social, community, and ecological levels are important to consider as well. In some cases, numerical measures will not fully reflect program success.

Time, money, and politics were the most commonly cited challenges. Groups report that members are busy, funds are limited, and the personalities of stakeholders sometimes come into conflict. All of these factors require patience and a willingness to stick with a program for at least five years to begin seeing results.

Discussion

The interview findings illuminate several important considerations for other groups that might be interested in launching their own regional brand and marketing program. First, a regional marketing program should take time to carefully define the criteria for its membership. Not only must the geographical boundaries be determined, but also whether production practices and quality standards should be included, and how much quality control the group wants to exercise over the labeled products. Many groups emphasized the importance of having representatives from a broad spectrum of the community involved with the marketing group. It is especially helpful to draw people from each sector of local agriculture, such as crop, livestock, orchard, and vineyard production, and to include both organic and conventional farmers. This ensures there is wide investment from many interests, and allows greater opportunity for collaboration.

Given that there is usually not much time or resources in the farming community, many groups recommend that at least one half-time person be hired to take care of communication and organizational responsibilities. It may be advantageous for a group to pursue initial funding from sources as close to home as possible, so that local stakeholders are personally invested from the start. If continued funding is a concern, a significant portion of this initial money can be put toward finding more, including hiring a grant writer.

Finally, networking is often perceived as a benefit of programs; it is good for a program to facilitate both formal and informal networking opportunities through which members can connect with each other, provide opportunities to talk about challenges and strategies, and form a broader community of growers.