



Cooperative Extension Programs

Cultivating Schools as Customers in a Local Market: *A Regional Small Farmer Distribution Network*

Vonda Richardson, Extension Marketing Specialist
Glyen Holmes, New North Florida Cooperative



Small farmers in the United States are declining in number and experiencing economic difficulties at a time when much of the country is enjoying prosperity. Small-scale farm operators in Florida, as well as the Southeast, are faced with many obstacles in their efforts to succeed. This situation has been recognized, and initiatives are underway to ensure the continued contribution of small farmers as an important part of agriculture in the United States. This bulletin describes a successful effort through collaboration of various public and private entities.

Florida A&M University and New North Florida Cooperative are collaborating entities in a regional network effort to enhance marketing opportunities for small-scale farmers. *NNFC/Small Farmer Distribution Network*, serving farmers in Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, is working to enhance economic opportunities for limited resource farmers through innovative market development, particularly direct sales to local school districts.

From the beginning, NNFC/SFDN recognized the economic opportunity in providing local school districts with agricultural products. The challenge in tapping this potential was developing a plan to break into the market. NNFC/SFDN put itself in the position of the prospective customer – food service directors of local school districts. The following attributes had to be conveyed:

- 1) *Professionalism*
- 2) *Purpose and Seriousness*
- 3) *Accountability and Commitment*



NNFC/SFDN has overcome many barriers while developing this new market over the past eight years, including dealing with existing preferences of potential customers. School food service directors, who have established suppliers, had to be convinced to deal with a newly developed idea for purchasing fresh fruit and vegetables. As a new potential vendor, NNFC/SFDN had to demonstrate its ability to provide the schools with high-quality products, prompt deliveries, fair prices, and courteous, professional service. By providing these goods and services, NNFC/SFDN established itself as a viable and trustworthy business, and created additional purchasing options for the local school food service directors. NNFC/SFDN strives to ensure that all of its interactions with food service directors are professional and courteous. These attributes have been important in establishing strong relationships with participating school districts in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Mississippi.

Demonstrating its purpose and seriousness has been critical in creating a relationship of trust with food directors. Included among a food director's responsibilities are providing healthy, nutritious meals to thousands of children daily, controlling costs, establishing menu schedules, and following federal guidelines. A food director needs vendors who are committed to providing high-quality products, in the quantity ordered, at the agreed-upon time, and at a reasonable price.



NNFC/SFDN works diligently to convey its serious commitment to meeting the needs of school food directors, and its resolve and commitment has alleviated many of the initial apprehensions that food directors had regarding conducting business with a new network of small farmers. Accountability of a vendor or supplier is extremely important to a food service director, who understands that things can and will occasionally go wrong. Food service directors need to be able to get in touch with the vendor quickly when there is a problem. Similarly, they need to be notified in advance if a delivery will be late or missed completely, so substitutions and adjustments can be made. Responsibility and accountability of has enabled NNFC/SFDN to develop lasting, successful working relationships with the participating school districts.

Providing free samples of a product is a marketing tool commonly used to develop awareness and familiarity. It was decided that delivering a free sample would demonstrate its ability to provide the quantities of high-quality product required. NNFC/SFDN provided all participating school districts with free samples to clearly illustrate that a network of small farmers could indeed successfully supply a school lunch program with local agricultural products in an acceptable, professional manner. This reinforces an image as a professional, courteous, serious, and accountable business that could satisfy the needs of local school food service directors.

NNFC/SFDN established a solid reputation by working with and meeting the needs of the participating local school districts in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Mississippi. NNFC/SFDN did its best to provide the necessary amounts of high-quality fresh fruit and vegetables on time whenever products were part of the school menu. By the end of the school year, NNFC/SFDN successfully and professionally fulfilled its commitment, and the working relationship with the food director continued to develop. Because of this successful business relationship, word-of-mouth advertising has opened additional opportunities in school districts throughout the region.

Vending Experiences



The mission of NNFC/SFDN implies the importance of facilitating the flow of profit from the value-added business operation to and within the local community. All the previously discussed details were essential to the successful sales of fresh fruit and vegetables to local schools. The end result of these efforts is an impressive record over the eight year period. The vending experiences over the past years have been positive steps in building a long-term, reputable business.

Many produce items have been introduced for this effort including fresh, cut and bagged leafy greens, green beans, sweet potato fries, and muscadine grapes. Other produce items include fresh, shelled and bagged field peas (purple hull, blackeye, lima beans, cream 4's), watermelon, strawberries, and blackberries. This strategy is designed to

encourage diversification of crops, increase in profitability for small farmers, and expansion of future market opportunities.

Sales have offered children in both rural and urban schools additional food choices. School food service directors have noted increases in student participation in the School Lunch Program, as well as increased sales to faculty, staff, and the community. Food directors have expressed pleasure regarding their business relationship with NNFC/SFDN, citing nutritional benefits and noticeable student and administrative acceptance as particularly significant advantages. These positive results have been attained through the combined efforts of NNFC/SFDN, their partners, and participating school districts.

Successes Over the Years

- Market Development
- Product Trials
- Building a Strong Delivery Record
- Providing Nutritional Benefits to School Children
- Creating Community Awareness
- Positive Business Reputation
- Teamwork
- Organization
- Infrastructure Development
- Innovative Partnership for Assistance
- Improved Economic Opportunity for Small Farmers

Schools Supplied

FLORIDA

SCHOOL	CHILDREN SERVED
Leon County	31,000
Okaloosa County	30,000
Santa Rosa County	22,000
Pinellas County	117,000
Gadsden County	7,000
Sarasota County	39,000
Nassau County	10,000
Jackson County	7,000
Palm Beach County	156,000
Broward County	230,000
Hamilton County	3,500
Bay County	25,000
Walton County	6,000

GEORGIA

SCHOOL	CHILDREN SERVED
Dougherty County	16,000
Brantley County	3,300
Ben Hill County	3,400
Tift County	7,600
Liberty County	11,000
SE Georgia (12 districts)	51,000
Marietta City	7,500
Newton County	13,000
SW Georgia (7 districts)	21,000
Glynn County	12,000

ALABAMA

SCHOOL	CHILDREN SERVED
Opelika City	4,300
Auburn City	4,500
Andalusia City	1,700
Geneva County	2,700
Daleville City	1,500
Tuscaloosa City	9,700
Montgomery County	33,000
Selma City	4,500
Enterprise City	5,200
Opp City	1,300
Elba City	1,000
Phenix City	5,200
Mobile County	64,000
Fairfield City	2,300
Homewood City	3,200
Dallas County	4,000
Butler County	3,200
Jefferson County	40,000
Dothan City	8,800
AL Region 5 (16 districts)	60,000

MISSISSIPPI

SCHOOL	CHILDREN SERVED
Jackson	31,000
Holmes County	3,600
Durant Separate	600

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College of Engineering Sciences, Technology & Agriculture
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