

Marketing: Boardwalk or Mediterranean Avenue?

Jack Manix, Walker Farm

At Walker Farm we've developed a very sophisticated marketing plan for our organic produce. It's based on the strategy I employed as a kid playing Monopoly. In the game you buy everything you come across and then hope you land on Free Parking. That's translated into growing a little of everything and hoping you can present it in a way that will transfix the eyes of the consumer, take over their subconscious, jump into their grocery basket, land on their dinner table and make them feel so good about their food choice that they'll want to buy a t-shirt with your farm's name on it. Unfortunately that's a difficult business plan to take to the bank when asking for a loan. Luckily for us, we started off small, didn't need a lot of startup capital and decided early on to cultivate our own unique marketing image.

Our area was ripe for organics even though the overall natural foods scene in the '80s was still struggling to shed the fad label. We were lucky enough to live in a locale that hosted a number of prominent horticulturists, a handful of exceptional caterers and a few avant-garde upscale restaurants with whom we formed a symbiotic relationship that benefited us all. We challenged each other with new ideas that led to us pushing crops for earlier and later season production. There aren't that many new vegetable classes that have been introduced but the color palette of those available has certainly expanded in availability over the last few years. Many of the varieties we grow are older heirloom selections or improvements on antique varieties that highlight flavor instead of shelf-life or shipping quality. The trick was to incorporate these funky fruits into our existing lineup and entice our customers into trying the new oddities. It took a couple of seasons but we were able to popularize edible soybeans, romanesco broccoli, ground husk cherry tomatoes, okra, German butterball potatoes, purple Calabash tomatoes, chocolate peppers, yellow raspberries and a load of other uncommon foods once customers saw the consistency of production and eye appeal of the selections and had success when trying something new. Their excitement with their new culinary discoveries encouraged us to expand our offerings so that now we grow nearly 70 varieties of heirloom tomatoes, 26 different hot peppers, 20 potato types, 6 colors of chard, 20 oddball eggplants, and so on, and so on. The diversity of these wacky but tasty foodstuffs helped shape our vegetable stand into a destination shopping experience instead of a solely stop-by convenience spot and helped rid me of my nightmare where I wake up one morning and all we have to offer are bulk bags of potatoes and onions and bunches of tired moldy cornstalks.

Of course the marketing, while the most important factor in the equation, is certainly not the sole factor. Behind the scenes, the planting schedules, harvesting and post-harvest methods are crucial considerations to maintain consistency, freshness and quality. Picking the crop at the right stage of growth, getting the crop cooled down quickly if necessary and storing the product at the correct temperature is so very important to maintain flavor. Cut your orange cauliflower a little too tight and by the end of the day it could look like an apricot. We find if we try to cello-wrap or plastic clam-shell anything it spells certain death for sales. That type of packaging is often equated with box store marketing and sub-standard taste. We have to keep our produce looking farmstand fresh and clean until the end of the day, no easy task when the temperatures are in the 90s. But

smaller displays, constantly restocked, help keep the displays looking as good for the last customer as they did for the first.

What does all this craziness translate into? Not a larger gross, but a better net. Pricing is only successful if it matches perception. When quality conscious customers come into an upscale store, they know they are going to pay more and I think they're disappointed if they don't! We discovered long ago that when you sell a quality product too cheaply, customers often think there is something wrong with it. As an old farmer told me "If only 10% of your customers are complaining, you're selling it too cheap."