

Marketing - One Producer's Perspective

We thank Laurie for sharing with all of us her expertise and perspective on marketing Ontario lamb. Laurie and her husband Bob are District 10 producers. More about their farm can be found at www.hawkhillfarm.ca

Laurie Maus - Hawk Hill Farm

Those of you who know that I am a marketing tool junky may start reading this article expecting all sorts of information on marketing tools such as web pages, social media, business cards and advertising. I will discuss these topics later in the article but that is not where marketing begins nor is that where marketing *should* begin.

First I will start with a brief bio. I am a scientist by training but a farmer by choice. I retired from a career as a regulatory scientist to full time, small-scale farming.

We have a small flock of purebred Tunis, purebred North Country Cheviots and a small commercial flock of Tunis/Cheviot cross F1 ewes. Our numbers are small so that every dollar counts in covering costs. We market exclusively via farm gate sales directly to consumers and breeders.

When asked what we do, most of us would say we raise sheep but that's a very narrow definition. That was the type of thinking that nearly drove the movie industry out of business when television was developed. Initially their business profile was as makers of movies...period. It was only when they realigned their business profile to state that they were providing entertainment that they were able to adapt to industry changes.

Simply put our farm produces food. While our clients increasingly want to know how that is done, ultimately what they want is a leg of lamb in their oven. However, that could change with time. Our focus should be on our clients' needs and we should be prepared to change our focus as our clients' needs evolve.

So what is marketing?

Everything you say, do and produce is part of marketing. Any part of that can have a positive or negative effect on your ability to sell.

No matter how lovely your business cards, how clever your ads or how tech savvy your website, if you cannot deliver quality products and services, it is all wasted effort and money. Why? Because the most powerful marketing tools are positive word of mouth testimonials and your good reputation. These can very quickly make the difference between success and failure. A good reputation takes time to build – a bad reputation develops almost spontaneously.

Marketing needs to start with the very basics – what you produce. Whether you are producing wool, lamb or breeding stock, your product needs to be superior in every way

to your direct competitors or be moving in that direction as quickly as possible. Set production and quality improvement goals and measure your progress in achieving those goals. Your clients want and deserve consistent quality. Get better before you get bigger. Your name and quality should be synonymous. This is where recognized programs such as Genovis help to give you credibility. If you are not part of such a program, keep equivalent records for your own farm use and to share with your clients when required.

While our operation is too small at this point to use Genovis, we have kept birth records, lamb weights at birth, 50 days, 100 days, live shipping weights and hanging weights since we began with sheep. We keep breeding records, health records and sale records. We work with our vet on a flock health program and work with a nutritionist on flock nutrition. We see each carcass we ship and discuss where we can improve with the butcher. We DNA test all our purebred animals for scrapie resistance. And we are just beginning.

Your service also needs to be superior in every way to your direct competitors. You need to be as professional as possible. That means responding to client contacts quickly and courteously, keeping records of client contacts and treating your repeat customers on a priority basis. These repeat clients are your bread and butter and deserve as much or more attention than new clients.

We try to respond to clients within 48 hours or less. We missed responding to an email by four days last week and lost a guaranteed sale as a result. Our repeat clients are given priority choice on our products especially when we do not produce enough to meet demand. We keep client comments and try to respond to these comments to address any concerns.

As I said, everything you say, do and produce is marketing. If clients come to your farm, what will they see? If they phone your farm, how and when will they be received. Every time you open your mouth to a potential client you are marketing. Think of how you come across. Think of how you would like to be treated, ramp it up a notch and treat your clients that way.

Given a choice between buying at a farm where you see diseased or unthrifty animals, barns in ill repair and dirty or one where the animals are clean, healthy and the property is in good repair, where are you going to buy? Despite what you would like to believe, people do judge a book by its cover and they do judge your operation by the condition of your property and your animals. Like I said, it is all marketing.

Now I come to the point where many of you started reading the article in the first place. First we assume you have done all of the above. You have to identify your clients based on the sale path you have decided to pursue.

For example, if you have decided to sell through the sale barns, follow sale barn records in your area and those farther away. It might be worth your while to truck your animals

further if sale prices will consistently more than compensate you for the difference in trucking costs. Then start attending the respective sales and try to identify what is selling high. Talk to the buyers and ask what they are looking for in an animal. Change your production to meet those needs. No matter how good your product is, if it is not what buyers want, you might as well not be producing.

The same process is true no matter what route you choose for marketing. Identify your client; find out where your client looks for product; find out what they want in a product; modify your production to meet your clients' needs and track your success in making these connections. Is this hard? No. Is this time consuming? Yes. Is it worth it? That depends on whether you want to stay in business or not.

In our case, we have identified our client group. For the most part, they are well educated, have higher than average income, are computer literate and are conscious of environmental and health concerns. They want to know where their food comes from and want to know that the animals were treated in a humane way. Most live in the city or have recently migrated from the city to the country. They are picky about quality but are not opposed to paying for it.

The key here is to know your market, think about where your clients look for products and what they are looking for.

While our website is valuable – and in this day and age essential – the best advertising is still word of mouth. Go where your clients are and talk to them.

Recently my husband and I took a wine tasting course. My marketing hat is never off and I mentioned that we were taking the course so that we could advise our clients what wines to pair with the lamb, beef and chicken we produce. I had handed out several cards before the end of the course.

Have attractive business cards professionally done. Have your contact information clear including phone, email and website. Don't spend a lot of money on printing because you should be spreading your cards far and wide. We had a beautiful card developed through another organization. These cards were full colour, bilingual, and an odd postcard size. As such they were inconvenient to use and more inconvenient for our clients to store as they do not fit in standard card files. Ultimately they will get lost. Think about that when you are designing cards.

Your website also needs to be attractive, professional and easy to navigate. While I could write a whole article on websites, there are two critical features for a website: can your clients find you on the web and, once they find you, can they find the information they need on your site?

When you do a search on the web, how many pages of search results do you scan? Probably not many. If your website is not on the first page – or even first two or three pages – you might as well not be on the web.

There is an entire field called search engine optimization. If you don't have time to learn about it, hire someone who is good at it to design your site. However be careful that, in your zeal to optimize your site for search engines, you do not make it useless for your clients.

Once a client finds your site, how quickly can they find what they want?

We have had a website for close to seven years and I have managed it for that time. I used to write flowing narratives on the site which entertained friends, family and long time clients. It was very difficult, however, for first time visitors to find the information they needed without going through everything. As a result, I redesigned our site so that visitors can find the information they need – fast. And, if they want to continue to read, they can.

Visitors to your site take about 10 seconds to determine whether or not your site is relevant to them. If not, they are off your site in less than 10 seconds. That is called the bounce rate. The bounce rate on our website is about 35% which is actually low. So, your site must be designed to grab a visitor's attention in less than ten seconds.

Visitors who don't bounce spend, on average, about two minutes on a site. Can your clients find the key information that they need in less than two minutes? If not, you need to revise your site.

Web analysis software is available that lets you monitor the traffic on your site. We follow our web traffic using a program called Google Analytics. We follow our own stats but, if you have a professional web designer, ensure that the stats are being followed optimizing the traffic on your site.

I know many of you are thinking that you do not have time to do all of this and I understand that. There are professionals who you can hire to do it for you. But do not dismiss marketing as something that is unimportant.

You are walking to the barn or climbing into a tractor to produce something that is being sold to a client and, if you are not thinking about marketing, you might consider rethinking what you are doing.