

**Saturday: 9:00am - “Who buys organic and what consumers want” with Marada Cook, Crown O’ Maine.**

Marada Cook:

When her father first started the business, he basically went knocking on doors to see who wanted to market their produce.

In 2004, food security became a hot topic in Maine, with the realization that there was no good and accessible distribution system in Maine.

Crown O’ Maine:

- Is a market, a pick-up and delivery service, a warehouse and distribution centre in Maine and in some other parts of New England.
- It’s a fairly busy business. When her father passed away, she and her sister took over, and realized they would have to grow to stand alone.
- Within 2 years, they grew 40% each year:
  - In 2008 sales were 404,000
  - In 2009 701,000
  - In 2010, 1,007,000
- This growth has been driven by Maine consumers realizing the necessity of locally produced food. They make sure that what they ask of their farmers is suitable to their scale. Rather than encouraging farms to expand, they try to nurture more small farms.

They work with:

- 62 independent retailers:
  - 40 restaurants
  - 38 buying clubs
  - 7 institutions
- 8 CSAs- if there is a crop failure, they can buy from Crown O’ Maine. CSAs can sell their excess to Crown O’Maine.
- Customers have come to adjust to seasonal food availabilities
- Marada tries to let customers know ASAP what they can expect to purchase from her.

Buying clubs:

- A group of individuals (often families)- come together to buy bulk natural foods, whole foods and healthy foods. Buying wholesale makes organic food affordable for these families.
- Has lots of growth potential (opportunity for rural areas as well as urban ones). These areas are generally poorly serviced, so buying clubs can be very attractive.

Volume has become an essential question:

- There are challenges with working with large businesses like Whole Foods: they like to order the day before and have stuff delivered the subsequent day. However, with COM an individual may order a 'big order' of 1 bag of Wheat berries, and you have to say no: as the order is too small. COM tries to refer them to buying clubs or retailers.

Customer trends:

- Key customer concerns: Food security, health concerns, budgets
- The costs of production keep going up, and some large farms' strategies are to lower prices of organic food, but this is not a good idea. Instead COM tries to encourage buying clubs to form and grow.
- Buyers are seeking truth in their food: when sending out emails, COM tries to explain something about the food. Ex: talking about varieties of heirloom potatoes. These descriptions enrich the buying experience.
- There is no question for COM that they must maintain prices for farmers, not reduce them. They can however encourage farms to become more efficient, and use appropriate scale of economy. Make sure farmers are not the ones to get squeezed.
- COM doesn't want to be part of a farm's marketing plan if it doesn't work for the farmer.

Times when it does work:

- Farms that require refrigerated distribution or offer unique products.

Key market strategies:

- Diversifying product base
- Embrace niche markets
- Build markets through community support (buying clubs)
- Use tools we've got and make those we haven't
- Look to be 'a light unto ourselves' market wise.

Challenges to small farmers: complying to national food regulations. This is why it is so important to create alternative markets.

COM has walked away from parts of the business that are least profitable (like wholesaling potatoes to Whole Foods Market) to focus on the growth of more profitable areas.

Priority: making organics accessible to lower socioeconomic brackets:

- There are many agencies that aim to deliver to low income families.
- Maine has very educated food consumers.