

Success Stories in Sustainable Agriculture:

MarketMaker is an online food industry database that helps producers identify the best markets for their products. MarketMaker has grown from a state-level program based in Illinois to a nation-wide program and will soon have an international reach.

The Story

Thanks to the MarketMaker program, over 15,000 Iowa food businesses are connecting with one another and with new markets for their products. The online database has especially benefitted farmers selling through non-commodity channels. Nearly 87% of the farms registered on MarketMaker's national network sell their products through direct sales to consumers and wholesalers. These farms have each been contacted an average of 2.9 times by customers or other food businesses that found them on the MarketMaker site.

The Opportunity

Craig Torsden of Iowa State University Extension and Outreach's Value Added Agriculture Program first learned of the MarketMaker program when it was launched by the University of Illinois Extension in 2004. The online database was developed by Rich and Darlene Knipe.

"Rich was a beef specialist working with beef producers in southern Illinois," Torsden explains. "They were looking for a market in Chicago but didn't know who to talk

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*—Craig Torsden,
Value Added Agriculture
Program Manager*

to, so they made this MarketMaker tool that listed all the restaurants and grocery stores in Illinois, georeferenced using something like Google Maps, so they could search out owners—their name, address and contact information—and give them a call."

The database consolidates food industry information, including the location of a variety of food businesses—such as farms, wholesalers, restaurants and grocers. Available free of charge to the public, users of the website can use MarketMaker as a directory. "Whether it's someone in Iowa looking for a market in New York or a restaurant looking for Berkshire pork for a white

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tablecloth restaurant, we're kind of like a dating service introducing people," says Torsden.



MarketMaker also has market research capabilities. The website georeferences U.S. census data, allowing food sellers to locate their target customers. For example, a beef producer can identify the census tracts in their area where households spend the most on beef.

The MarketMaker program piqued the interest of several people at Iowa State's Value Added Agriculture Program. "We grow so much food [in Iowa] but only have 3 million mouths," says Torsden. "We thought if we could reach Chicago restaurants with Iowa products that would help. We talked with Rich and Dar about expanding the program to Iowa."

Both programs had something to offer one another. In exchange for bringing the MarketMaker resource to Iowa, the Value Added Agriculture Program could offer MarketMaker greater exposure through the Agricultural Marketing Resource Center based at Iowa State University.



Linda Naeve of Iowa State's Value Added Agriculture Program presents at a Market Ready training in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on March 6, 2014. Market Ready teaches producers how to use the MarketMaker program to identify potential buyers and prepares producers to make the sale with information on effective product presentation, insurance, food safety and more.

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Connection to the Leopold Center

The Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture became an early partner in expanding MarketMaker to Iowa. “I envisioned [MarketMaker] could be a useful tool in Iowa,” says Rich Pirog, who was then coordinator of the Center’s Marketing and Food Systems Initiative. “It was clear that MarketMaker was going to be adopted by other states as well, and in the long term, we thought that if all the states surrounding Iowa also adopted MarketMaker, it would truly benefit Iowa farmers looking at regional markets.”

In 2005, Iowa State’s Value Added Agriculture Program received a \$25,000 competitive grant from the Leopold Center to purchase data and create the Iowa MarketMaker website. The Iowa MarketMaker program continues to be supported by several sponsors, including the Leopold Center, the Farm Credit Network, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, USDA Rural Development, the Agricultural Marketing Resource Center, and Iowa Workforce Development.

The Strategy

The Iowa MarketMaker website lists more than 15,000 Iowa businesses, including 486 producers. In addition, the MarketMaker database has expanded to include 19 states and the District of Columbia. MarketMaker technology was recently licensed to Riverside Research, a nonprofit created to extend technologies created at universities to the military and other potential users. Riverside Resource offers MarketMaker greater capacity. With the upcoming addition of India, MarketMaker will become an international program.

While MarketMaker allows connections between food businesses all over the United States, it is also used on a local level. Value Added Agriculture is collaborating with the Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG), a network of 15 local food groups in Iowa, to register food businesses in their region with MarketMaker. The Value Added Agriculture Program is also creating MarketMaker widgets for RFSWG websites, which will allow users to search for food businesses in their RFSWG region. The first widget was created for Hometown Harvest of Southeast Iowa and can be found online at www.hometownharvestseiaowa.org by selecting “Local Food Search” from the “Find Local Food” menu.

Find more success stories online at www.leopold.iastate.edu/change.



Visit the Iowa MarketMaker website at www.marketmakeriowa.com.

MarketMaker recently added a classifieds section, where users can list items for sale, items they are looking to buy, services offered and transportation needs. Iowa’s MarketMaker site is unique in that it also allows users to post food industry job opportunities, which are automatically listed on the Iowa Workforce Development and USA Jobs websites as well.

Sean Skeeahan and Jill Beebout of Blue Gate Farm near Columbia, Iowa, were the first to post a job using MarketMaker’s new feature. They were looking for new crew members to work on their Certified Naturally Grown Farm, which produces vegetables, eggs, jams, honey, mushrooms, yarn and hay. Although they did not receive any calls about the job before the season began, Skeeahan says, “I was very happy MarketMaker gave us another forum to advertise our need for labor. Given our geographic location, we need to cast a wide net when advertising a job.”

Contact

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