

## EMAIL MARKETING ON OUR FARM

*Dan Copeland of Sweet Berry Farm in Marble Falls, Texas. Dan gave a talk on this at the North American Berry Conference in February, 2005.*



**D**o you have an existing internet/email account? For the purpose of this talk, we are going to assume everyone has an account and knows how to use email. If you do not, chances are that any teenager in your family will be happy to explain how to get your own account and how to use email as soon as possible.

### **How do we use email to market the farm?**

We normally open the season softly; in other words, production is still on the upward side of the curve. We do not like to advertise much the first few weeks because we are afraid of getting more customers than we have fruit (something we have vowed not to let happen). We can attempt to regulate our initial customer flow by trickling out Season Opening email notifications. As production increases, so does the number of notifications being sent. Once the entire email list has been sent, we will begin additional advertising. • We notify customers when a new crop is being harvested. Most of our customers seem to need to be reminded when the next crop is ripe. • Invariably, there will be times in the production cycle of our crops when supply is overshadowing demand. It is important to state that we *never* deviate from the base price of our fruit. Once you have destroyed that base price, customers will always want the reduced rate, even in subsequent years. Instead, if we feel that we *must* give some sort of discount to encourage sales, we will do it using coupons or quantity discounts. With the email list, we will notify our customers that NOW appears to be a great time to harvest. We also like to include a coupon – simply a portion of the email that the customer can print out and bring in. The quantity or dollar amount of the coupon varies with the amount of fruit that needs to be harvested. It is important to point out that the coupon always has a “valid” time period (normally just a week to encourage immediate response) and the note “one per customer.” We also encourage recipients to forward the email/coupon to all their friends – that is what we want: more pickers! Customers love to send their friends the coupons and by doing so, they are hopefully increasing our customer base. Where this normally bites us in the rear is when a customer prints out a bunch of coupons and hands one to everyone else in the checkout line. We do not harvest fruit for wholesale, even in times of glut. Instead of spending money on pickers and then trying to find an instant market, we take that money and advertise more. Hopefully this will get more customers out in the time of need and help us in the long run by increasing our customer base. • We like to let our customers know of important upcoming dates or special events such as when we are set to close and reopen again or remind them of the upcoming disk dog tournament. • Sweet Berry Farm is closed to the public roughly five months out of the year. While trying not to be a nuisance, we like to send our customers one notice in the off-season just to keep us fresh in their minds. • Email is good for press releases – you can send out press releases to different forms of media in just a little bit of time. The problem with this use is that the media normally receives tons of email and chances are they might skip over yours or delete it as “Junk Mail.”

### **So, what is the big deal about email marketing?**

The most important thing to recognize in the use of email is that each letter you send out to your customers is basically free. It takes very little time to send them out and the recipient receives that letter instantly. The Sweet Berry Farm email list has a little over 2400 names on it (I realize this is small). If at 8:00 am Monday morning I decide that a notice needs to go out because the previous weekend was rained out and I have fruit that needs harvesting, I can have 2400+ letters delivered into the hands of my customers by 10:00 am that same day. Granted, not all the letters will be read that day, not a lot of customers are going to drop what they are doing and head to the farm instantly (a few will, though) and some of the letters will be deleted as “Junk Mail.” But I normally expect to see a response by the end of the week and for sure by the coming weekend.

### **What is the cost?**

The cost of this "direct email" depends on if you slate the \$14.95 (or thereabout) monthly Internet expense to your business or personal account. Let's say that you call it a business expense. I pay roughly \$120 per year for Internet access. If I send out six email notices per year at 2,000 per = 12,000 notices. At \$120 per year, my cost is now one penny per notice. Now, think what that will be when I double or triple the size of my email list. Not to mention that my kids now get to use the Internet for free.

### **Developing a list**

An email list is no different from any other mailing list. The effectiveness of your email marketing will be determined by the quality of your list. So, how do you get the addresses for your list? *Voluntarily!* I believe you should only put folks on your list that WANT to be there. At Sweet Berry Farm, we collect addresses several ways. Normally it is just a simple pad of paper that a customer writes their address on. This pad is located at each of the checkout registers, in the Store area and at any booths we may have in various market shows. Sweet Berry Farm also has a website through which folks can join the list. A website is very useful to us but don't sweat it if you don't already have one. (In fact, I would argue a website's usefulness if you can't develop and maintain it yourself.) As mentioned before, we encourage customers to spread the news about the email list in hopes that their friends will want to get onboard.

### **The 'Down Side'**

You probably will not be able to develop a list instantly. Therefore, it is going to take a year or two to really begin to utilize email in your marketing plan. The majority of your list will be customers that have already attended your farm. Because of this, your customer base will not vastly increase due to email marketing. You do have to spend a little time typing the names into your address book. And, invariably, you won't be able to read someone's handwriting. I often try to encourage folks to send me an email, then all you have to do is right click on the email and choose 'add sender to address list' (if you use Outlook Express). This year I am going to try to set up an old computer in the store for people to type in the address themselves.

### **Suggestions when sending email**

My wife says that I need to make the email notices more fancy; I like to keep them plain and simple. Most people are in a hurry and don't want to spend a lot of time on your email. If it is plain and simple, it will also download a lot quicker into the customers' inbox, very important to a lot of folks. This is a matter of personal preference. If at this point you do not know how to send an email – ask that teenager to help you and give them the following suggestions. • I like to send no more than a hundred at a time, it makes everything go faster. Send the original email to yourself, then be sure to put your customers addresses in the "bcc" field. This means that customers will not be able to see all the other addresses you sent to. • Compose your email, highlight the body, hit ctrl c to copy it, address it and send it out to some of your list, and then open a new email, hit ctrl v to paste the old email into the new one. Now you don't have to retype the entire email. Use a local Internet service provider. Some of the online accounts will not let you send more than a hundred or so emails at a time (they think you are a spammer). Even your virus software will become suspicious if you send a bunch at a time. • I suggest putting your point in the subject line, for example, "The Strawberries are ready!" Some of your customers might delete the email before ever reading it if the subject line is blank. This is especially important if sending Press Releases to the media. An email plan is only one tool in your marketing handbag. The email program is very useful to us at Sweet Berry Farm, and we think we will be able to cut our marketing costs in half in the coming years through its use.

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