

MARKETING ORIENTATION – A PRODUCER’S VIEW

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Albert Rose used to be “on the other side”. After completing his M.S research in direct marketing at Cornell University, moved to Chicago and was a buyer of potatoes for Frito Lay. He worked nationally and internationally (Canada) with producers to meet the specification of potatoes and the service required by Frito Lay. He did that for 4 years until the rat race chased him back to a different kind of lifestyle - farming.

In 2001, Al returned with his wife and children to the family farm in Phillipston, Massachusetts. He became the fourth generation of Roses to farm the land. Previously, the farm had produced apples that were mainly for the wholesale market. The focus of the business was on production and quality apples. Al’s father, Bill, began the transformation of the farm from a predominantly wholesale operation into an exclusively retail business. On his return to the farm, Al decided that he wanted to expand the farm’s focus to meet the needs and skill of his family and to position the business for the years to come. Red Apple Farm is now a popular get-away destination for the urban and suburban rat race that Al was once running in. They sell a farm experience with pick-your- own apples, pumpkins and a farm store. They have developed the farm to meet the 2 demands of local and not-so-local (the greater Boston area) consumers, and he believes that he has developed a better market orientation for the business.

At a recent marketing training session for Cornell Extension Educators, Rose shared some of his views and the lessons he had learned in working for both Frito Lay (in the buyer’s perspective) and Red Apple Farm (in the seller’s perspective) in producer marketing orientation. This article provides a brief review of some of the points he shared on that day.

Rose observed that many producers, understandably, have a production focus rather than a marketing mindset. “A marketing mindset is a difficult thing to develop. Marketing is intangible and difficult to quantify in contrast to production that is scientific and quantifiable. Marketing is touchy-feely.”

Rose added, “Farming is one of the few businesses where the majority of business managers start their careers in the family business and never leave it. The turnover of personnel, in contrast to other types of business, is slow. This leads to an ‘inside out’ perspective which, while good for excellent quality” he feels “is not conducive to developing marketing orientation”.

Rose felt his time with Frito Lay, off the farm, was a beneficial part of his marketing education for returning to the farm. “Leaving the farm provides business operators to have an outside- in perspective on the way they view the farm, which supports a marketing orientation.”

Rose made several points, which he believes have allowed him to be successful in making his business more market orientated:

1. “I ask myself ‘Why are you in business?’” He believes that success is correlated to the farm’s consumer orientation. “If we are in business to satisfy customers, we will be successful at marketing. If we are in business for other reasons, our business will struggle to be marketing orientated.”
2. “Marketing is the most important tool in my toolbox. This is the focus of my business.”
3. “I add value to any product that I can.” He thinks it is important to sustain a front-line focus on whom you are serving. An example Al gave was when he was 3 he went to a farmers’ market in Mexico with his brother. A lady in a tropical fruit stand allowed them to try the fruits, and every time a tiny drip of the juicy fruits started dribbling down their chins, the lady held out a napkin. They didn’t realize quite how effective the frontline strategy was until they walked away from the stall having bought several pounds of fresh fruit, without questioning the price and with pocketfuls of used napkins! The lady had made the tasting session such an enjoyable experience that Al and his brother had not considered the pricing.
4. “I sell products as opposed to inputs.” Al elaborated that he is not selling apples; he is selling a product with a perceived value. He gave an example of both frontline focus and selling an input with a perceived value when he was working with Frito Lay (a Pepsi company). He commented that it never went unnoticed when he and his colleagues walked on a potato farm that was selling to Frito Lay, and the first thing on display

was a Pepsi vending machine for the employees. A minor detail that showed the farmer had a strong marketing orientation.

5. "I list both tangible and intangible goals and build an action plan." One thing that supports their business in doing this is through their understanding of their customers. They survey customers through conversation and written survey and know where they come from, how they heard about the farm, if they have made repeat visits, why they come to the farm, what they want to buy, etc. It helps build goals for the business around their customers' needs.

Al's final comment about developing their business to have a marketing orientation is that on a regular basis, they ask themselves three fundamental questions:

- i) What business are we in?
- ii) What business should we be in?
- iii) What business do we need to be in?

With a constantly changing market, these questions not only address the needs and wants that they are currently trying to satisfy, but they also address what needs and wants are developing with their customers, and how their business can best meet those needs and wants. Al believes that he is in business for one reason alone: "to satisfy consumers' ever-changing needs and wants (both tangible and intangible)". This, he believes, has enabled him to develop an effective marketing orientation for his business.

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