

OCTOBER
2020

ONLINE MARKET CASE STUDY



Online Market Curbside Pick-up

1. Stay in your car
2. Roll down your window and tell us your full name
3. Roll down your passenger side rear window
4. Someone will place your order in your vehicle

www.acornvt.org/onlinemarket



WE EXPLORE:

Effects of COVID's Shutdown

How We Responded

Lessons Learned

Working Towards Future Resiliency

"We are seeing how fragile our food system is, with the globalization and concentration of production, and a few huge processing plants. We have to go back to regional and local food systems." - Jim Goodman, President, National Family Farm Coalition,

BACKGROUND

(Source: Vermont Food System Plan Market Brief)

Over a quarter of Vermont farms (1,833) sell directly to consumers through farmers markets, CSAs, and other "direct market" channels.

Consumer trends show people are looking for a relational form of food purchasing.

Collaborative marketing is already happening at various levels, and can be built upon to support individual producers and farmers markets unable to compete with the marketing savvy of large companies.

Direct market farmers often lack the marketing skills, technology, broadband access, and funding necessary to reach modern consumers in this competitive environment.

THE SHUTDOWN

COVID-19 exposed the precarious state of the local food economy in the Champlain Valley, and beyond. Once the statewide shutdown was announced in mid-March, Champlain Valley growers quickly lost farmers' market, restaurant and institutional business, creating uncertainty in the local ag economy and food insecurity issues. A nationwide meat shortage occurred and international imports dropped. It was unclear when, or if, important direct markets would re-open in 2020.

At the same time, the public was seeking alternative ways to source food safely outside of grocery stores. Curbside deliveries were born, special shopping hours for vulnerable populations were created, and armies of volunteers connected by mutual aid networks formed to assist in delivering food to those who couldn't venture outside their homes to risk infection.

COVID-19 also reinforced something ACORN has known for years; lack of access is not about a lack of food. It's a problem of distribution. Provide a larger market for local food producers, efficiencies of scale will increase, prices will drop, and more people will be able to access local food.



HOW WE RESPONDED



ACORN immediately surveyed and interviewed our network's food producers and found that they can and want to produce more food, but need access to more markets. We also found that a large portion of area farmers and food producers aren't online.

By the end of April, ACORN organized an Online Farmers' Market with two centralized distribution points in Bristol (Tandem Kitchen) and Middlebury (Hannaford Career Center). ACORN also created an interactive [Google Map](#) that lists the nearly 250 farms and food producers in ACORN's Food and Farm Guide, an annual publication since 2010. (ACORN was forced to cancel the Guide in May 2020 as a result of COVID-19).

The public was driven to the Online Market on the [ACORN website](#) to identify nearby growers and producers as well as online farm stores where they could place orders online. [The ACORN website received an 800% increase in traffic in April and May, with the majority of people visiting the Online Farmers' Market and Map page.](#) All orders were paid for through the producers' individual websites. ACORN did not handle any of the money exchanged, and food was pre-packed in bags with customers' names on them for curbside pick-up. ACORN provided marketing and publicity support using its network, and volunteers assisted with curbside pick-up. As the farmers' markets reopened, ACORN decided to stop running the online market so as not to compete with them.

ACORN's Online Farmers' Market ran for five weeks, from April 29 - May 28, 2020, and added just [over \\$10,000 to the local food economy.](#)

LESSONS LEARNED

After closing the market, ACORN hosted focus groups with the producers and received feedback from customers. ACORN identified a few key features that a future online market would ideally implement :

- A centralized, streamlined **e-commerce platform** that makes it easier for people to pay all participating vendors in one place
- An improved system for producers to **aggregate and deliver food**, including a location with cold storage and longer opening hours*
- The ability to **monetize the platform** in order to pay for a coordinator/manager; the platform cannot run on volunteers alone
- The ability to be **nimble and dynamic**, in order to respond to sudden disruptions in the supply chain

**Due to the Champlain Valley's rural landscape, this will prove to be one of the biggest challenges moving forward and ACORN looks forward to working with all engaged stakeholders for a community-oriented solution.*

FEEDBACK FROM PRODUCERS

Thank you for the opportunity to distribute our plants to the greater community in this unprecedented time.
- Kelley Mills, Hannaford Career Center's Garden Patch

Thank you for having such a good idea and making it happen so quickly! It was a good trial run and hopefully Addison Co. can make similar models work in the future. - Rachel Smith, Pin Up Pickles

Thanks so much for all your hard work! Please do update us about a centralized ordering platform.
- Silas Doyle-Burr, Last Resort Farm

It was very uplifting to us producers to know that ACORN was there to help.
-Hannah Sessions, Blue Ledge Farm

Thanks for including us. We've been happy to reach customers we wouldn't normally be able to.
- Jill Kopel, New Leaf Organics

PLANNING FOR RESILIENCY

ACORN is currently providing on-the-ground insight and direction to create a free, not-for-profit mobile app and platform that connect local food producers with community members and business owners. This centralized online ordering system will eventually have an embedded pick-up and delivery mechanism. ACORN will move more farms online, and act as a key facilitator in solving the challenges of rural aggregation and distribution.

