

2008 and 2009 Local Foods Matchmakers Notes from Vermont

The Local Foods Matchmaker began in response to several sources of feedback provided to the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets:

- Large scale food buyers who had limited experience with local food producers did not know where to begin for building local relationships.
- Buyers who *did* have experience working with local providers still wondered who they might be missing.
- Farmers and food producers interested in reaching new customers found it very time consuming to go door to door. In some cases, they didn't know who to call or where to begin to reach purchasers at larger businesses.

Simultaneously, the Vermont Department of Economic Development and the Northeast regional offices of the Department of Defense had in place their own Matchmaker designed to connect small businesses with government agencies and government contractors to build business relationships. The Matchmaker at the Department of Economic Development has followed what is essentially a speed dating format. Businesses sign up for brief one-on-one meetings with those who they think might be interested in purchasing their goods / services. If there is a promising connection, they can follow up on it outside of the event. This format seemed to be relevant for food businesses, too. And so, the Agency of Agriculture launched a Local Foods Matchmaker.

The Local Foods Matchmaker's first year showed that the project could accomplish the goals of:

- Providing an introduction to Vermont food options for buyers new to local foods or headquartered outside of the state.
- Providing an introduction to sales options for producers new to business-to-business or wholesale marketing, and basic information about how to make a smoother transition into those sales.
- Helping businesses with established local buying programs discover new products.
- Creating a time-efficient way for sellers to meet with many potential clients at once.
- Removing perceived obstacles to meeting with large buyers – including a misconception that these buyers are not interested in local foods.
- Establishing Vermont as an ideal trial ground for larger companies interested in experimenting with how a “Buy Local” component can fit into their purchasing model.

The following pages provide initial notes on lessons Vermont learned for:

- Schedule for the Day
- Venue
- Budgeting
- Outreach Strategy
- Sign Up System
- Materials Sent Before the Day
- Materials Available the Day of Event
- Follow Up

The organizing committee for the Vermont event consisted of the VT Agency of Agriculture, Vermont Hospitality Council, Vermont Grocers' Association, Vermont Fresh Network and Healthcare Without Harm.

Day's Schedule:

Below is a sample schedule for the day that was used in 2009. This schedule attempts to balance one-on-one sessions with education and general networking opportunities. One drawback of the schedule is that there is no opening and / or closing that brings everyone together in the same space to establish shared goals though a keynote. None of the spaces used in 2008 or 2009 had a room that could accommodate all participants, and participants came and went at different times, but a plenary session is something to consider in the future.

Local Food Matchmaker Agenda

[DATE (1st week November)]

[LOCATION]

8:00 – 9:00 Coffee & Matchmaker Packets Available
Packet pick up & registration lasts until 10:30

9:00 – 10:15 Information Sessions – Concurrent Panels

Organizations Supporting Business-to-Business Local Food Sales: *Private Dining Room* Learn about organizations that support connections between local food buyers and sellers around Vermont.

Complying with Regulations: *Dining Room* Talk with state staff specializing in consumer safety, meat inspection, GAP audits, and labeling laws.

Introduction to Wholesale Markets: *Library* A basic introduction to wholesale markets for local food sellers.

10:30– 11:15 Free Meetings Between Buyers & Sellers

11:15- 12:50 MATCHMAKING – 10 minute sessions

12:50 – 2:00 Lunch & Buyers Find Sellers

2:00 – 3:35 MATCHMAKING – 10 minute sessions

3:45 Closing Reception
[Directions to Location]

Agenda – Additional Information

INFORMATION SESSIONS (9:00 – 10:15)

Organizations Supporting Business-to-Business Local Food Sales: *Private Dining Room* Learn about organizations that support connections between local food buyers and sellers around Vermont. Non-profit organizations can help make the connection between local food producers and restaurants, food service, health care centers, schools, and other institutions. Representatives from leading assistance providers will briefly present their organization’s goals and resources, then be available for questions from participants.

Complying with Regulations: *Dining Room* Talk with state staff specializing in consumer safety, meat inspection, GAP audits, and labeling laws. This session will be primarily a time for question and answers, as well as making connections with resources to help ensure your business is in compliance with all necessary regulations.

Introduction to Wholesale Markets: *Library* A basic introduction to wholesale markets for local food sellers. A panel of different types of buyers and distributors will address fundamental questions, like making initial contacts, follow up, pricing, and best ways of building a “buy local” marketing strategy outside of direct sales.

FREE MEETINGS BETWEEN BUYERS & SELLERS (10:30– 11:15)

Buyers have pre-assigned tables for all the matchmaking sessions. A map with table assignments will be handed out at registration. We ask that buyer be seated at their assigned tables starting at 10:30 so that sellers have a chance to find anyone not on their official match sheet to make introductions before the event begins.

MATCHMAKING (11:15- 12:50) & (2:00 – 3:35)

Sellers follow their assigned schedules throughout the day in 10 minute one-on-one sessions. Schedules are sent beforehand based on sellers’ preferred meetings and there will also be print-outs available at the day. A bell will sound to remind everyone to change places when the 10 minutes are over. There will be 5 minutes to finish and get to your next meeting. Please be respectful of the people who will follow you and leave on time.

LUNCH & BUYERS FIND SELLERS (12:50 – 2:00)

The Vermont Fresh Network is working with Juniper Hill Inn to feature as many sellers’ ingredients as possible in the lunchtime buffet. Buffet will be provided in the same area where registration occurred. At registration, *sellers* will be given an assigned seat for lunch. Maps will be provided. This is the only time that sellers will be stationary, allowing buyers to connect with business that interest them. If you are a seller, please try to take your assigned seat by 1:30.

CLOSING RECEPTION (3:45)

We hope that everyone can join us for light dessert and coffee at the end of the Matchmaker day. The tables in the Great Hall will be cleared off so that sellers with extra product to sample can set it out for all to try.

Sponsored by Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Healthcare Without Harm, Vermont Grocers’ Association, Vermont Specialty Food Association, Vermont Hospitality Council, Vermont Fresh Network

Venue:

The set-up for a Matchmaker event is relatively simple, primarily consisting of many small tables that can seat 2-4 people. The ideal venue would have the following attributes:

- Central room, or series of rooms, large enough to hold tables for each registered buyer spaced far enough apart that buyers and sellers can't overhear each others' conversations.
- Separate room where sellers can congregate during unscheduled sessions to network informally, and where organizers can answer questions and post any necessary information / updates.
- Room to set out meals / the closing reception (may be same location as area described above for networking & information table).
- Storage space where specialty food producers can hold extra product.

Vermont's 2008 and 2009 Matchmakers drew 40 buyers' tables, some with multiple individuals, along with 60 sellers (2009 capped the participating sellers at 60 so that there would not be too many sellers for buyers). A good estimate for total number of individuals is 130-150.

Budgeting:

Vermont did not charge for participating in the inaugural Matchmaker event, but in the second year added a fee of \$20 per seller and \$50 per buyer table. There was no decrease in interest or attendance when the fees were added and an additional recommendation for 2010 is to require that the registration fee be received *before* participants are allowed to participate in the pre-event matching. This requirement would discourage participants from signing up but not showing up on the day of the event – a significant problem when people are counting on one-on-one meeting times.

Costs for the Matchmaker were straightforward and consisted of:

- Event location – a relatively large location is needed to fit in the multiple tables.
- Food during the day – many participating food sellers donated their product.
- Reception the previous night for visitors traveling in from out-of-state (2008) or gift bag for out of state travelers (2009).
- Incidental costs for materials such as folders, name tags, agenda copies, etc.
- The 2008 & 2009 Matchmakers did not incur significant costs for marketing (see advertising strategy below) but that is an area that could require more spending if the organizers decide to significantly scale up the event in the future.
- Labor for organizing the event and staffing it on the day.

Outreach Strategy:

Organizers found that it was important to focus first on confirming the buyers, beginning with a small group of “anchor buyers” to draw in others in their sectors. Targeted sectors were: distributors, supermarkets, food co-ops, food services (including all types of schools), restaurants, health care providers, and specialty retail outlets. Larger scale buyers were also encouraged to have more than one table for different divisions – for example one for produce and another for dairy and meat, one for shelf stable and another for perishables, etc. Promoters then used the established buyers list to attract the sellers.

Seller registration came primarily *after* they knew who would be there. One piece of feedback from 2008 was to make sure that the mix of sellers better reflected the mix of what buyers wanted to purchase, and so in 2009 specialty food producers were capped at one-third of sellers and special outreach was made to fresh produce sellers, who buyers had felt were underrepresented in 2008.

Below are some approaches Vermont used to garner participation in the Matchmaker.

Here “buyers” mean any business that will purchase product from a farmer or specialty food producer. “Sellers” are farmers and specialty food producers. Distributors are both buyers and sellers – and are a key component of the Matchmaker. The goal is to have all distributors with a regional presence participate, because many buyers will want sellers to go through existing distribution channels and matches are easiest if those distributors are also available for meetings.

Low cost (or free) ways to get the word out.

- Early discussions with agricultural organizations in the region hosting the event to generate interest among local producers.
- All organizing organizations posted a link to online sign-ups from their webpage.
- Save-the-date e-mails sent to all available lists and then Please Register e-mails sent as follow up. Lists included:
 - Trade Associations (eg maple growers, grape & wine council, beef producers)
 - Non-Profit Groups that Serve Farmers (eg NOFA-VT, Farm Bureau)
 - Business Plan Advisors (VT Small Business Development Corp, VT Farm Viability program)
 - VT Grocers Association
 - Extension Services
 - State Government
- Placement on all relevant calendars.
- Blurb sent for inclusion in organizational newsletters and printed as featured story in Agency of Agriculture biweekly newspaper, Agriview.
- Simple flyer sent to organizations to post on bulletin boards and make available at events prior to Matchmaker.
- Conference call with statewide agricultural support organizations to generate a list of producers known to be interested in selling to larger buyers, or already part of this market. These producers then received:
 - E-mail
 - Mailed postcard
 - Follow up phone calls
- Media pre-story: in 2008 the Associated Press ran a story on the Matchmaker plans several weeks before it happened, which provided coverage in multiple Vermont papers (and papers beyond Vermont). In 2009 sign ups happened too far in advance of the event for pre-coverage, although extensive media coverage occurred at the event itself.

**Sample Materials Available Online at www.vermontagriculture.com/buylocal:
Save the Date E-mail • Simple Flyer • Press Release**

Sign-Up System:

The best system for making matches is still an open question.

In the 2008 Matchmaker, sellers signed up for their buyer meetings on sign up sheets at the event – these sign up sheets were a quick way to make matches, but sellers strongly requested a system where they would know their matches ahead of the event.

In 2009, sellers ranked their buyer meeting priorities and the slots were assigned based on a combination of listed preferences and the order in which seller priorities were received and sent out prior to the event. This system had the predictable challenge of getting both buyers and sellers to confirm their slots in time for pre-matching to take place. Latecomers on the buyers' side did not appear on the choice sheets for sellers and organizers also spent time getting the priority sheets back from sellers. Additionally, the system of one person doing matches and assigning time slots for 13 possible meeting times across 40 buyers and 60 sellers was an unwieldy amount of labor.

Recognizing the pros and cons of each system, organizers propose an online solution. A website could have the following features:

- Participants gain access to the online matching site only after paying their registration fee – reducing the number of no-shows (and giving a reason to get payments in on time!)
- Buyers post profiles, including what products they are / are not seeking, followed by a sign up sheet.
- Sellers browse the buyer profiles and sign up for their matches by filling in the slots online and tracking their meeting times in their own agenda.
- Sellers without easy Internet access have the option of calling in their preferred matches to the event organizer, who can then go online for them.
- Organizers print final meeting sheets from online to post at the event. Agendas posted at buyers' tables allow sellers to see if there are any slots remaining for buyers they may have skipped before, so that they can sign up in person on the day of the event.

Additional uses of a website if there is programming support could include:

- Allowing buyers to click on seller profiles from the sign up sheets
- Options for exchanging questions / learning more about each other prior to the event
- Options for continuing to exchange information after the event

**Sample Materials Available Online at www.vermontagriculture.com/buylocal:
Registration Packet**

Materials Sent Prior to the Event:

In 2008, materials sent prior to the event for registered participants focused on how the event itself worked. Feedback received from buyers & sellers following the event indicated that more preparation needed to occur ahead of the event to prepare for the unique format. Organizers added a tips sheet on preparing samples for the Matchmaker (where sellers move and buyers are stationary) and a tips sheet on making a 10 minute (or less) pitch. Another lesson learned was that confirmation packets needed to be sent in both electronic and hard copy forms and preferably posted online as well.

Packets sent to participants included the following information:

- Cover letter explaining how the day works
- Agenda of the day with notes on how it works.
- Tips for Preparing Samples
- Tips on How to Structure a 10 Minute Business Meeting
- Description of attendees separated into buyer & seller:
 - Name of Buyer / Seller

- For Buyers: Type of Business (eg. Restaurant, distributor, supermarket)
- For Sellers: Types of Products (including special designations, such as organic)
- For Sellers: Distributors Used (if any)
- Business Location(s)
- Contact Information

**Sample Materials Available Online at www.vermontagriculture.com/buylocal:
Tips for Preparing Samples • Tips on a 10 Minute Meeting**

Materials Available on the Day of the Event:

Packets to participants should include the following materials.

- Agenda of the day
- Updated description of attendees (see confirmation packet description)s
- Form for submitting corrections to attendee list
- Map of tables / who is at what table
- Listing of online directories of VT farms & products (for buyers' reference and so that sellers can check if they're listed in all relevant places)
- Evaluation of the day
- Any additional facts sheets for sellers interested in learning more about wholesale or business to business sales (see sample materials)

In addition to these packet materials, it is helpful to provide

- Bags for buyers to carry samples
- Nametags that include icons designating buyer / seller and type of seller (eg carrot for produce, cow for dairy, etc.) to facilitate networking.
- Table tents at each table saying who is there
- A large easel & paper at the registration area to post any announcements / changes in participants (for example if a buyer drops out)

Note: Final contact information will need to be sent out one last time after the event to update for last minute changes in representatives.

**Sample Materials Available Online at www.vermontagriculture.com/buylocal:
FAQs for Wholesale Markets • Labeling Guide • Evaluation**