

Farm Direct Distribution

Brigitte Morgan (Professional + Producer Grant Program)

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Title: Farm Direct Distribution

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Situation:

Redesigning the way food is grown, stored, packaged, and transported is critical to addressing our current predominant food systems' contribution to climate change, global financial instability, social injustice, high demand on fossil fuel inputs, and pollution of land, water, and air.

The current food system's way of doing business yields the following unsustainable equation in which, on average, 10 calories of energy are used to produce 1 calorie worth of nutritional value. Comparing the energy input to the energy or nutritional benefit leaves little doubt that the predominant food system is not sustainable. Our food production and distribution systems cannot continue this way indefinitely. Instead, new food production and distribution models must lead the way to a new and more sustainable food system.

Specifically, the distribution of food must become more locally focused, replacing old models that rely heavily on the movement of food over long distances, requiring more packaging and refrigeration, and creating a tremendous dependence on fossil fuel inputs. Where food is available from local sources, new systems must emerge to simplify and make direct the connection between local eaters and local farmers.



Xiong Farms selling at the Marin Farmers Market.



The Farm to Fork refrigerated truck.



Objectives:

1. Promote stewardship of natural resources by directly supporting small, local, and sustainable family farms
2. Promote and improve the economic viability for our member producers
3. Support a direct connection between customer and farmer, which increases the investment on both sides to support quality products and sustainable practices
4. Encourage product/crop diversification by increasing direct market opportunities for farmers to provide new products to educated customers
5. Improve our understanding of the economic, social, and environmental implications of adopting sustainable practices by demonstrating the economic and environmental benefit of purchasing from local farms



The Agricultural Institute of Marin website, far left, and a Farm to Fork Brochure.

Actions:

Our model, Farm to Fork, delivers locally and sustainably produced products and provides education to local institutions, while creating direct market opportunities between local and sustainable food producers and neighboring institutions. To accomplish this, we have worked on the following:

1. **Research distribution systems:** Marin Farmers Markets (which merged with non-profit 501 (c) 3 Agricultural Institute of Marin in 2010) conducted research on distributors Veritable Vegetable, Marin Produce, and North Bay Produce, and did a general survey of other area distributors including US Foods and Sysco.
2. **Develop easy-to-use ordering and delivery systems:** Marin Farmers Markets developed a simple system using Excel, Word, and QuickBooks to process product availability and delivery. A consultant team then worked on developing a database order processing system that is more integrated, automated, streamlined, and user-friendly. Use of efficient technology is key.
3. **Train producers:** Participating producers received individual mini-trainings on how to participate and improve packaging and labeling to match program quality and standards.
4. **Conduct educational outreach to producers and customers:** Marin Farmers Markets developed and used handouts, brochures, fliers, emails, presentations, and marketing tools to reach out to and provide information for producers and customers.



Cha Her Farms, left, and Hidden Star Orchards sell their wares at the Marin Farmers Market.



Marin Roots Farm selling produce at the Marin Farmers Market.

Results:

For four years, Farm to Fork's activities resulted in farm fresh products being purchased directly from farmers markets by local hospitals, schools, and restaurants. The program simultaneously created a new opportunity for small, sustainable farmers to add boxes of product to their farmers' market-bound truck, which were then loaded onto a single truck delivering directly to local businesses and institutional customers.

In 2007, during the initial startup and development phase of Farm to Fork, about \$100,000 of locally grown and produced foods were purchased by and delivered one day a week to local institutions.

In 2008, revenues doubled to about \$200,000 and the program instituted a small markup to help recover program costs.

In 2009, the program continued with moderately increased revenue and with reported producer satisfaction even higher.

In 2010, AIM began detailed discussions with Veritable Vegetable, an established organic produce distributor, who we began to partner with starting in spring 2010 to shift the logistical functions of the program to them, while maintaining the role of educator, customer development, and farm to fork advocate

During early development, the program remained small and manageable, growing in manageable increments. Despite the declining economy, sales grew steadily and the program maintained a positive and growing contribution to both customers and farmers. Ultimately, AIM understood that the growth necessary to be financially sound in the long run was more than we were prepared to take on alone. Forging a partnership with an established distributor with many shared values became the desirable next step in the program's evolution.



Potential Benefits:

This program focused on producer education and training; creating new marketing opportunities and changing the food purchasing practices of local schools, businesses and institutions; sharing findings with other communities; and helping create a new local food sourcing paradigm, all guided by practical experience and effective systems. At only two days a week, the program demonstrated promise as an additional revenue stream for small to mid-size local producers.

Farm to Fork brought additional income – about \$4,500 per producer a year for 70 producers – during the time they participated. Local customers are learning more about local food production, which generates long-term loyalties to purchasing from these local producers.

2008 and 2009 (farmers only) surveys gauged program satisfaction. On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being excellent:

2008 Farmer Response:	2009 Farmer Response:	2008 Customer response:
Benefit to business = 3.2	Benefit to business = 3.3	Quality of the product = 4.3
Quality of program = 3.7	Quality of program = 4.4	Quality of the services = 4.9