

Building Purchasing Relationships with a School Food Service



The key to any farmer successfully selling their goods is to know their customer. The more a producer knows about their customer and their needs the better they'll be at determining whether they are a good fit for selling to that customer.

In the case of schools, there are a number of things that are helpful for producers to keep in mind. In Wisconsin, the average amount that can be spent on the food for a lunch (which includes milk, protein, carbohydrate, fruit and vegetable) is between \$0.75-\$0.90. School Nutrition Directors are responsible for providing healthy, nutritious meals (that students will eat), budgeting and controlling costs, establishing menus, managing USDA commodity food, managing kitchen staff, and meeting federal nutrition guidelines. With all these responsibilities and constraints, they need high-quality products, in the quantity specified, at a price that works, with a consistent delivery system. Meeting these needs and establishing a successful working relationship take time and good communication. When each party is familiar with the challenges and opportunities that the other party faces, a working relationship is more likely to flourish.

Steps to building successful purchasing relationships with a School Food Service

1. Start small. To develop a reputation as a reliable vendor, commit to a realistic sales volume and develop a realistic delivery schedule that suits you and the school food service.

2. Identify and set up business appointments with the directors of school food service (rather than school cafeteria managers), since they are typically responsible for making final procurement decisions.

3. Invite the food service director and employees to visit your farm. Your best selling point is your farm and your products. When food service staff visit, they will see how you care for your farm and the work it takes to produce the food they want. Food service directors need to develop menus that accommodate what grows seasonally in your region, and visiting your farm will help make this point.

4. Offer free samples. Think about offering potential school food service customers samples they can test in their school food programs.

5. Make sure you are considering the labor costs, product, and delivery costs to ensure your program is sustainable in the long run.

6. Utilize proper post-harvest handling techniques to maximize the quality and shelf life of produce. Delivering clean product that needs minimal washing during prep and that maintains its quality longer than most produce shipped longer distances will help food service staff appreciate what you have to offer.

7. Be aware of how your farm liability insurance interfaces with the school food service's food safety program. Every school food service has a strict food safety program that

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REAP Food Group:
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is based on the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) principals. Temperature control of fresh and cooked products is very important. Therefore, arrange for proper refrigeration of merchandise during storage and distribution. Also, incorporate strict quality standards when assembling and packaging products.

8. Supply products that are difficult to obtain from long-distance shippers, such as highly perishable fruits or greens or different varieties of apples, tomatoes, potatoes, etc..

9. Consider growing a different variety of crops to serve more of the daily needs of the school food service. Cherry tomatoes, for example, only require washing, store well, and are easy to serve. Talk to schools as early as possible to plan accordingly.

10. Offer to visit classrooms or the lunchroom to give students a chance to meet ‘their farmer.’ If comfortable you can offer to lead educational activities with students. Activities developed by Wisconsin Homegrown Lunch ‘Farmer Educators’ are available online to give you ideas at www.reapfoodgroup.org/farmtoschool. These kinds of connections can be powerful motivators for students to try foods they may be new to them.

11. Consider ways to have produce minimally processed (sliced, diced, etc). By working with a local processor, certified kitchen, or an on-farm processing facility you could provide product that will save the food service time and potentially make you more money.

12. Work with the school food service on meeting their nutrition guidelines, which dictate what can be on menus. Because menus are developed a month ahead of time, substituting products can be difficult. Devise a system with the food service director for supply replacements, such as putting “local fresh seasonal vegetable” on the menu to accommodate the ebb and flow of your vegetables.

13. Develop availability lists and ordering protocols for your business. Include what products you have available, size of food items, quality descriptions, estimated quantity, price per unit, specific instructions on how to place an order, and your contact information. Include other timely information that would provide food service directors with factors necessary to make good purchasing decisions (“last week for melons,” etc). Forecasting what products they can expect one to two weeks ahead of time is very helpful for planning.

14. Clearly establish a payment schedule plan. School districts often have a payment cycle of 30-90 days or longer. As a farmer, however, you may be used to presenting an invoice and receiving payment upon delivery or within 30 days. This difference in operation needs to be worked out between a school district and the grower before purchasing begins.

A Purchasing Agreement with the School Food Service should include:

- The total estimated volume of each item to be delivered.**
- Amount and price of standing order items.**
- Delivery schedule: time of day, frequency, and location.**
- Packing requirements: standard box, grade, loose pack, bulk, etc.**
- Post-harvest handling practices: is the produce pre-cooled? How clean should the product be?**
- Cost per unit, payment terms, payment process.**
- Names, phone #s, and emails of contact people for ordering and billing.**

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