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Creative Marketing for a Small Wine Grape Region

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Creative Marketing for a Small Wine Grape Region

Abstract

A needs assessment of the Umpqua Valley wine grape industry in 2001 revealed the greatest impediment to our sustainability was a lack of coordinated marketing. By working together creatively, board members developed successful marketing strategies and effective ways to fund their strategies. After 3 years, survey data revealed that the number of visitors at participating wineries increased by 35% and wine sales increased 40% on average. Fundraising events contributed \$90,000 for marketing, and seven new wineries and 11 new vineyards were established. This proves that sustainable programs can be home grown in a cooperative environment.

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Introduction

The popularity of wine as a social beverage continues to grow in the U.S. During this century, wine consumption per capita growth consistently surpassed the growth in beer consumption. This trend provides an additional diversifying economic opportunity for many farmers and promotes wine grape planting across the country.

Oregon is one of several states experiencing a boom in grape planting. Although Oregon is the fourth leading wine grape producing state in the U.S., it has many small, not yet well-known grape growing regions. The American Viticultural Area (AVA) the Umpqua Valley lies between two of the world's best-known grape growing areas, Northern California and Willamette Valley of Northwestern Oregon. Despite the fact this area has many similar climatic attributes to its neighbors, not many people have heard of the Umpqua Valley, thus limiting exposure of its wines.

In 2001, I conducted a needs assessment of the Umpqua Valley's wine grape industry. Results showed a need for developing a marketing program as the highest priority if our wine industry wanted to become sustainable and advance its position in this growing industry.

Cooperative Effort

A cooperative marketing project began in 2002 with six members of the Umpqua Valley Winegrowers Association, which included the Extension agent. The group met twice a month for 1 year to develop a business/marketing plan. Members included growers with a history in the area, new growers with ideas from other regions, and growers with good business and/or marketing skills. Our group knew that to be successful, we needed the commitment from nearly everyone in our area because the task of marketing would be time consuming and expensive.

During the initial months, I researched other agricultural marketing projects to help me visualize the process. One marketing program in Sonoma County California was reviewed in the *Journal of Extension*, (Vossen, 1992). Vossen stated, "Individual producer and commodity groups had neither the funds nor the expertise to develop and implement a comprehensive marketing program. We therefore recommended forming an independent umbrella organization to oversee a countywide marketing effort." Little has changed in the past 14 years. Most producers and commodity groups probably do not have the expertise or funds to create an effective marketing program. However,

we later discovered that wine grape growers have a product that along with creative ideas can support a successful local marketing plan.

Creative Marketing

Our small group created a mission statement supporting our goals of promotion and cooperation, and we created a business/marketing plan listing strengths and weaknesses of our Umpqua Valley AVA. The plan also developed 24 strategies to be carried out over a 4-year period that responded to these weaknesses and built on our strengths. Getting the right individual assigned to each strategy proved to be an important step for the process. Marketing specialists at Oregon State University were asked to review our plan and make suggestions. Listed below are many of our key strategies.

- Direct traffic off the local interstate to designated wineries through billboard signs delineating our AVA.
- Develop sales promotional materials that stand out and are unique (brochure packets, insert cards, maps, passports).
- Develop a Web site that describes our history, wines, climate, and gets promotional materials to the customer.
- Develop a database from 9 vineyard plots for prospective growers (phenology, climate, grape quality).
- Create a plan to attract new vineyard and winery businesses.
- Hold educational wine tasting events to enhance local demand.
- Target specific metropolitan areas in the West with our portfolio mailings.
- Enhance our partnership with other AVA's in Southern Oregon through joint marketing efforts.
- Work with local growers to elevate wine and grape quality through educational programs and tasting panels.
- Invite high-profile wine and tourism writers to tour our area and to judge wines at our major wine tasting events.
- Develop barrel tour and wine tasting events to pay for our marketing efforts.
- Hold an annual marketing workshop for our entire membership to refocus group priorities.

Many of these marketing strategies were evaluated at wine shows and seminars by industry and Extension peers and found to be original. Large brochure packets were designed to hold a card for each winery and one vineyard card showing all the locations in our AVA. Interchangeable cards keep our materials from becoming obsolete. We developed a passport to encourage visitors to stop at many locations. Each time customers visit a different winery, they get their passport stamped. When a customer has five stamps, he or she is given a small gift and entered in a drawing for a mixed case of wine.

The majority of our funds were raised locally. Our area developed an annual gala event that attracts about 700 people from around Oregon to taste wine and food pairings from 28 wineries and 14 restaurants. Auctions at this event were significant contributors to our budget. We have two barrel tasting tours in the spring that bus about 550 people through a north or south county tour, each visiting seven wineries. Net revenues from these events go to our marketing fund.

Establishing nine vineyard plots around the county to collect phenology and grape quality data to share with prospective growers and winery owners has been a very valuable tool for attracting new vineyards and wineries. Continued growth of our area is vital to attracting more attention from wine writers and tourists.

Conclusion

New wine grape growing regions across the country will find a faster road to economic sustainability if producers and wineries work closely together, and with their Extension agent, to develop a good business/marketing plan for their organization. The plan should promote finding the best wine grape varieties for their region, developing a quality product, using creative marketing ideas as described above to attract attention to their area, and using wines in events to pay for the marketing plan.

References

Vossen, P. (1992). Starting a county agricultural marketing program. *Journal of Extension* [On-line],

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