



Researching and evaluating an effective web-based local food sales template

Abstract: Local producers and institutions developed and tested a web-based template designed to simplify internet retail sales of local foods.

Q How can Iowa farmers use the Internet to expand the local food system while maintaining identity and individuality?

A Discussions with local food producers and institutions from across Iowa helped the project partners develop a plan for a web-based template/computer program that would provide the basic tools for web-based sales, while considering the needs and wants of the potential buyers.



Background

This project was Phase I of a multi-phase project to explore how a web-based local food sales template could become an integral part of a local food system. Development of the web tool was the primary task of Phase I, while Phase II will feature continued development and testing.

Northeast Iowa Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) led the project, which included help from dozens of entities, including:

- Northeast Iowa RC&D, Postville – Producers in the GROWN Locally growers cooperative with additional input from institutional buyers including Luther College and Oneota Food Cooperative;
- Iowa Valley RC&D, Williamsburg – Producers and institutions in the Iowa Valley Regional Food Initiative, including Grinnell Area Local Food Alliance (GALFA), the Johnson County Area Local Food Alliance, Kalona Organics and Grinnell College;
- Prairie Partners RC&D, Humboldt – A newly formed group of producers and institutions working collaboratively to increase local food sales to institutions as a result of the Prairie Partners “Buy Fresh Buy Local” campaign; and
- Prairie Winds RC&D, Garner – The producers involved in the Belmont Area Farmers market working in cooperation with the Wright County “Here’s to Our Health” project to increase local foods production and consumption, including One Step at a Time Gardens CSA.

The project goal was to create an on-line sales tool that would address the needs of both the farmers and the markets. Objectives were to:

1. Complete Phase I of the development of an easily navigable web-based sales template for local food producers,
2. Facilitate input from producers and institutions to maximize template and web-site development,

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Budget:

\$14,801 for year one



GROWN Locally radishes

3. Work with partners to identify and secure additional funding sources for Phase II of the project, and
4. Conduct outreach and education in Iowa.

Approach and methods

Advice was sought from a variety of Iowa partners, including producers and buyers, about expanding the local food system through internet sales. A computer programmer-consultant was hired to gather information and engage partners in visioning and discussion. The template was designed for producers, producer groups, and farmer networks to market to local clients, such as individuals, institutions, and large bulk buyers. The producer groups continued their own sales and marketing, but agreed on the need for an internet presence. Institutions ordering from the producers also expressed a need for easier access to local foods and greater local food planning capacity.

Results and discussion

The consultant met with the project partners throughout spring and summer 2007, providing a prototype web site to facilitate discussion. Design and coding work began in September 2007. The consultant made design choices that allowed the end product to be an effective open source application. This project also helped participants develop a greater understanding of the expenses and technical expertise associated with development of a food system that accommodates internet sales.

Data related to the user benefits from the template will not be available until after Phase II of the project when the impact of the template on sales can be quantified.

Conclusions

Major findings are defined by the list of features requested by partners and then included in the program. The core features of the web template were as proposed initially, but were refined to better meet the needs of producers and buyers. The institutional buyers influenced the process substantially, offering a perspective that growers could not provide. The variation in levels of experience and organizational capacity also influenced the process and led to increased understanding of the needs and resources of the producers.

Impact of results

Specific impacts included increased dialogue and understanding between growers and institutions as they worked together on template development. Lessons learned included the value of developing tools and a common language to describe the project to participants and organizations not familiar with a local food system or had no understanding of why there is a need to expand internet markets to promote local foods.

Phase I development was completed and partners provided input for the next stage. Phase II was funded, programming was completed, and the trial run for the template occurred in the spring 2009. The template is scheduled to be released on the Leopold



GROWN Locally produce.

Center web site with written and visual instruction by late spring 2009. Additional tools for installation are scheduled to be available on the Leopold Center web site by December 2009.

Education and outreach

Early data about the project appears at www.agresticsoftware.com. More information will be posted after Phase II of the project has been completed in December 2009. RC&Ds throughout the state have agreed to promote the use of the tool upon its release. Since several RC&Ds held producer/institution information gathering sessions for the project, they are poised to distribute additional information about the template and its use. Some also have been involved in the trails and expressed interest in participating in the development of visual installation tools. An intern helped identify local food providers who might have an interest in the project after completion of Phase II.

Leveraged funds

Cash funds were leveraged to pay for coordination and administration of the project activities by RC&D staff at Northeast Iowa RC&D and Golden Hills RC&D. Cash funds also were contributed for planning, marketing and outside consultation associated with groups participating in the planning for the project. The project also was noted during discussions with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation before Northeast Iowa was selected as one of the nine W.K. Kellogg Foundation Food and Fitness communities to receive \$500,000 for Local Food and Fitness Planning. Substantial in-kind contributions also were made for staff, travel and meeting expenses during development and testing by the Natural Resource Conservation Service, GROWN Locally, Grass Run Farms, Northeast Iowa RC&D, Golden Hills RC&D, Iowa Valley RC&D, Prairie Partners RC&D, Prairie Winds RC&D, several producer groups, institutions and individual producers.

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