

CHAPTER FOUR

Summary

The purpose of the Southwest Marketing Network is to ensure that new, existing, and prospective producers in the southwestern U.S.—especially small-scale, alternative, and minority farmers and ranchers—have the necessary connections, technical and financial assistance, marketing information, business and marketing skills, and peer examples that will improve their profits and viability. Access to appropriate information and training for producers in the Four Corners states, and also for service organizations active in the region, is essential to this goal.

To evaluate possible information and training needs within the Four Corners states, the Network surveyed service providers to assess their own organization’s capacity to provide assistance in agricultural marketing to small-scale producers, and to gain their views on the information and training needs of their organization, and of their small-scale producer clients, on a number of topics related to agricultural marketing.

Eighty-seven service providers participated in the survey. The majority of respondents serve a local clientele—either a one-county or multi-county area—and a variety of institutions, from farmers’ markets and retail businesses to restaurants and cooperatives. Almost half of their clients have farms or ranches smaller than 100 acres and almost 80 percent have gross annual farm sales under \$100,000. One-in-five has an operation of 1,000 or more acres. On average, 38 percent of the respondents’ clients are minorities, and 28 percent use alternative methods of production, such as organic, free-range, or pesticide-free production.

We asked the service providers to indicate whether their organizations provide information or training on over 40 marketing-related topics, and to tell us about the relative importance of these topics for their organization and its small-scale producer clients. For our purposes, information was defined as “data presented in some way (e.g., leaflet, handbook, over the telephone) that is provided to your members/clients” and training was defined as “instruction (either in person or by a trainer or through self-training using training modules) to develop proficiency in a topic.” The survey recipients were asked to rank the need for information and training on the same topics—first, the needs of their organization, and then of their producer clients. A few notable observations follow:

- ⇒ Except in a few instances, information is provided by the service organizations at a rate of more than twice that of training.
- ⇒ Not surprisingly, for most of the individual topics except those related to skills-building, service providers indicated a greater need for information and training for their small-scale producer clients than for their own organizations. However, on only 10 topics were there significant differences between the perceived needs of the organization and its clients.
- ⇒ On the whole, the level of information provided by service organizations on a given topic increases as the perceived importance of the topic to clients increases. However, for some individual topics, the number of service organizations providing assistance is relatively low compared to the perceived importance to small-scale producer clients, indicating a gap in information delivery. The top 10 topics fitting this description include financing, distribution, product development, culturally traditional foods and other products, pricing, eco-labeling and

other labeling, policy capacity, customer service, processing, and dairy products. Because of the gaps indicated in this analysis, these topics seem to warrant special attention by service organizations.

The service providers who answered our survey believe that the two largest barriers for their small-scale producer clients, in terms of gaining the assistance they need, are taking time off from farm or ranch work and lack of producer interest in changing their operations. However, all of the barriers listed were ranked as moderate or major concerns by at least 20 percent of respondents, and thus warrant attention in planning assistance programs.

In regard to the resources used most often to obtain information and training in agricultural marketing, we found differences between service providers and what they report for their small-scale producer clients. Computer-based resources, books and manuals, and conferences are used considerably more often by service organizations than by their clients. For both groups, however, conferences, workshops, and on-farm events top the list.

Those whom we surveyed believe that most of the direct marketing options we listed (including farmers' markets, agri-tourism, on-farm/ranch sales) had increased in usage over the prior 5-year period in the Four Corners states. Two exceptions are restaurant sales and CSA, which, according to those surveyed, had not expanded at the same level as the other alternative marketing approaches.

In terms of marketing issues within the region, although service providers note a variety of concerns, market access/niche marketing, transportation, and distance to markets are the major ones. Interestingly, these were the same issues identified by the initial group that gathered in 1999 to discuss marketing issues in the region (and that subsequently led to the creation of the Southwest Marketing Network). Clearly, these key issues continue to demand creative solutions.

The survey is not representative of all service providers in the region, and, so far, there is no survey of farmers and ranchers themselves to compare with the perceptions of service providers regarding their clients' needs. Despite this, we believe that the results identify many interests and needs in agricultural marketing for small-scale producers in the Four Corners states.

The survey results outlined in this report are already being used by the Southwest Marketing Network to help plan the project's education and training efforts. The intent of this publication is to give other service organizations—those within and outside the Four Corners states—information that can help them in their planning as well. We hope that these results will help bring more resources and attention to bear on the important agricultural marketing needs of the small-scale farmers and ranchers in the Four Corners states.