

How one customer revolutionized our CSA program.

Oakley, E. and M. Appel. 2008. How one customer revolutionized our CSA program. *Growing for Market*. Vol. 18, No 10.

Five years ago a regular farmer's market customer shared with us his inventive spin on our Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. We were at our Saturday farmers' market in Tulsa, OK and were in the process of signing people up for our CSA program when he approached us with his proposal.

At the time, our CSA was like many across the country. Members joined in the winter and received a half bushel basket of produce for twenty weeks throughout our growing season. Like a good number of CSAs, it gave us the benefit of up-front winter income while giving members a 10-15% discount over our farmers' market prices. Members picked up their baskets each week at either the Wednesday or Saturday farmers' market.

The customer who approached us with his innovation said that he wanted to support us by becoming a CSA member, but spent some of the summer out of town. Rather than being bothered with trying to find friends to pick up his basket in his absence or being disappointed by missing out on so much of the harvest, he instead proposed paying us money upfront in the winter for a "debit" style system. He would have an account with us off of which he could shop throughout the season. It was such a compelling suggestion that we were eager to experiment.

The next season we opened up the "farmers' market CSA", as we call it, to fifteen customers and kept our regular "basket CSA" members. It was only our second season in operation, so we wanted to be careful about not over-committing with too many members at once.

From the beginning, people were attracted to the farmers' market CSA. It gave them the chance to pick out whatever they wanted from our market table. If they didn't want cabbage, they didn't have to take it. If they wanted to get ten pounds of tomatoes one week, they could. We subtract their weekly selections from their credit balance. CSA members can shop from either the Wednesday and/or Saturday farmers' markets. As with the basket CSA, they receive a weekly newsletter with stories, photos, and recipes from the farm. They get a ten percent bonus added on to their membership amount.

We have a somewhat cautious attitude towards change, so our transition to the farmers' market CSA was measured. We gradually added farmers' market CSA memberships each season. By our fourth year farming, we reached a cross-road in our marketing plan. With an equal number of farmers' market and basket CSA members, we felt we needed to make a strategic decision for future growth. A central aspect of our farm philosophy is functioning as a two-person farm. As a result, we have an obvious labor limitation. We could not effectively expand either program since our energy was too divided to intensify either. We felt we needed to choose one program or the other and do that well.

We ultimately opted to eliminate the basket CSA and focus exclusively on the farmers' market CSA. This was an arduous decision to make. The basket CSA was a significant part of our identity as a farm. We commonly had a waiting list three times the size of available membership spaces. We knew there would be some people who would be unwilling to make the switch. Although we were clearly averse to disappointing our loyal basket members, we finally concluded that we needed to do what was best for our farm. And we have never looked back.

The benefits of doing away with the basket CSA are many. No more market pickups. Assembling the baskets was frequently one person's full-time job for an hour during market set-up. Perhaps most liberating is not worrying about growing so many unusual crops to satisfy the need for diversity in the baskets. Watermelon diakon, for example, are fun for a basket CSA, but they were never a big money maker at our market stand. We are no longer obliged to pay such close attention to the contents of member's baskets from week to week to avoid repetition and boredom. The result is that some of our time and fields have been freed up from growing crops that were not remarkably profitable. We still grow a wide variety of crops; we are simply not as obsessive about it as we once were. Another significant weight off of our minds is that with the farmer's market CSA, we bring what we have. No scrounging for forty equally-sized celery heads to fill the baskets. Farmers' market CSA customers know they must come early to get the best selection.

Which is why the farmers' market CSA is not for everyone. Several former basket members have mentioned the convenience of knowing that even if they couldn't get to the market early, there would still be a varied basket of produce waiting for them when they arrived. Some people preferred the surprises inherent in the basket program. They enjoyed being pushed to try new veggies they would not otherwise be likely to select from our market stand. Some took particular pleasure in the novelty of having a basket of produce picked especially for them. They said it was like regularly receiving a present. Others used the basket program to inspire them to add more veggies to their diets as they knew they had a basket of produce ready for which they had already paid. Ultimately, about one third of our basket customers chose not to become farmers' market CSA members. Nearly all of them continue to shop with us, though not with the same intensity as the basket CSA promoted. Nevertheless the majority of basket members readily made the switch to the farmers' market CSA and now prefer its flexibility.

We gain considerably from the farmers' market CSA. As was also the case with our basket CSA, we have a dedicated and informed group of customers who learn about the latest news on the farm and who care about our ups and downs. Our habitual interaction at the market makes us each an essential part of the other's life. No matter the weather, we know we will always have a substantial number of CSA customers at each market, giving us a core group of supporters that makes setting up on rainy days comforting. Moreover, when a wash out is predicted we often email the CSA the night before the market to remind them of our availabilities and promote their attendance.

Our CSA is now smoothly integrated into our farmers' market arrangement. Rather than competing with our time for traditional market sales, it adds to them. Our CSA members tend to come to the market early, surrounding our stand with a vibrant crowd that attracts other customers. People seem drawn to the busyness, as though there must be something good for sale at our table if so many people are gathered there. CSA members are liable to try unusual crops since they have read about them in the newsletter. They tend to take home extra produce, getting a wider selection and greater volume of veggies overall than regular market customers. We have noticed that many of our CSA customers who were former traditional market customers spend more with us

now than they did previously. Since money is absent from the transaction, some CSA customers joking say that they feel like the veggies they get each week are “free”. All agree that not having to be troubled about bringing money to the market is a major benefit.

We now have eighty-five farmers’ market CSA customers and a healthy waiting list. Next year we expect to raise that number to 100, where we anticipate capping it. That gives us sufficient working capital at the beginning of the season while not overwhelming us with too many obligations.

A critical aspect of the farmers’ market CSA is keeping track of every customer’s on-going balance. We created an Excel spreadsheet listing each person’s name and their total. Using a simple subtraction formula, we enter their weekly purchase amount, and Excel subtracts it from their on-going balance. Because no cash is actually changing hands, CSA members are even faster to service than traditional farmers’ market customers whose money we must deposit and for whom we generally need to make change.

Despite its major advantages, no arrangement is perfect. With eighty-five CSA members, we must remember that a certain percentage of the produce we bring to the market is technically already sold and will be picked up by our CSA members. CSA selections generally comprise one third of our weekly market “sales”, depending upon the time of year and the volume of produce we bring each week. There is a certain amount of paperwork involved, namely keep a tally going of their current balance as mentioned above. Additionally, putting a name to everyone’s face and remembering them can be a bit challenging, especially at the start of each season. There are always a few members each year who seem to enjoy the concept more than the reality and have a hard time making a regular commitment to attending the market to use their balances.

In the first few seasons, we carried over any remaining balances to the next year. We soon learned that this created an untenable situation for us as we were starting each new year with residual debt from the previous season. To remedy this we adopted a use-it-or-donate it policy. Members must consume their entire balance each season, or the remainder will be donated in produce to a local food bank. We encourage members to regularly inquire as to their balances to help them gauge their purchase totals. We also try to make a point of telling each member their balance on the final market of each month. Mid-way through the season we devote a newsletter to balances.

We allow three different membership amounts so that customers can select a size that adequately reflects the amount of veggies they eat: \$200, \$250, and \$300. For example, in our sign-up letter we remind them that there are approximately 20 weeks in our season. So if they purchase a \$200 share that is equivalent to buying \$10 a week worth of produce. Members can always add to their balances at any point should they use it all before the end of the season. Those who do tend to re-up in fifty or one hundred dollar increments. Any time they augment their balances, they are given the same ten percent bonus.

The success of the farmers’ market CSA is indicated by the high percentage of repeat customers. We have averaged a roughly ten percent attrition rate each year; some people move, others build their own gardens, and a few find it doesn’t fit their needs. Yet they overwhelmingly remain loyal customers and supporters. Our CSA customers have become vital fixtures in our farm lives.

Each season we find a new reason to appreciate the farmers’ market CSA, and we have come to see it as the foundation of our farm. Since starting the farmers’ market CSA, we have heard that other farms throughout the

country have similar programs. Our experience helped us see that CSAs are wonderfully adaptable, and they can be modified to fit the farm and its customers' needs.