

Chapter Two: The CSA Farm Member

Recruiting

You have made some decisions for share sizes and types and the length of your season. Now you need members!

Recruiting membership can seem intimidating for a shy farmer but after you talk to the first enthusiastic person, you will gain confidence. As your own excitement grows, people will become more interested, they will start to talk up the idea to their friends and neighbors and the ball will be rolling. This is a great time to be promoting fresh local fruit and vegetables and the CSA model is no longer 'new' – many will be familiar with the concept.

It will be useful to set – and stick to – a goal for the number of shares you will offer the first year or two. Be sure to not get swept up in the excitement and accept more shares than you can handle! Also, make sure that when interested people start to call you are ready to answer all of their questions. It would be useful to have a brochure by the phone or the website handy during these calls. Be sure to provide as much information as possible. You want prospective members to know what to expect.

Here are some ways to recruit new members that have worked:

- Most growers agree that the best way to promote is through word of mouth. When people are happy being a member of your farm they will tell their friends. Some offer discounts or rewards to members who successfully recruit.
- Suggest to vacationing shareholders that they ask a friend or relative to pick up their share.
- While no longer as 'newsworthy' as it was in years past, CSA can still be an attractive feature in the local newspaper. Ask a reporter out to the farm to report on your exciting operation.
- Place your brochures and/or posters in

areas where interested people gather (church, library, health food store, environmental organization).

- Some growers have found a certain workplace where all or many of their shares can be sold. Target groups that are likely to be interested in the concept of CSA, like environmental organizations.
- Signs at farmer's markets.
- Have a website, and/or make sure you are listed on the CSA farm sites. A couple that will accept donations, but do



not require a fee, are the Robyn VanEn Center (www.csacenter.org) and www.localharvest.org. Neither will require that you have your own computer (work from a friend's, or the library) though both will link

your email if you do. Michigan growers can be listed free at www.csafarms.org. Many other states have similar services.

- Give talks, slide shows, or other presentations to civic groups or others.
- Go on a local talk radio with your proposal.
- Give each interested person two brochures; one for them and one to share with another.
- Have an open house or meeting for the public to discuss your ideas and attract customers – remember to set out good food for them!

Core Groups

A core group is a group of persons more involved in the farm than the other farm members are. The core group can be a true asset to your CSA Farm, and bring community into the operation in a new and valuable way. A core group, according to Elizabeth Henderson (*Sharing the Harvest*) is "...the grower-member council in which we come together to run our

CSAs.” Some consider the existence of a core group to be the defining feature of CSA.

Any size of farm can benefit from this select group of supporters. They, along with the farmer, can set up goals for the direction of the farm then go about accomplishing those goals. The core group can alleviate much of the burden that is otherwise on the farmer.

Logistics vary with the form of the farm, the interests of the farmer, and the commitment of the core group. Some new farms start with a core group that then develops the plans, finds land and hires a farmer. But most CSAs are initiated by a farmer, who may have a harder time starting the core group. Reluctance to seek help can be an issue, but even more important is anxiety over giving up some of the control. Be sure you are clear on what you want—and *don't* want—the core group to be responsible for. Most growers who have formed a core group are happy they did. The core group should include a diversity of members who can help the farmer maintain the viability of the organization and it should change as the needs of the farm does.

Some of the duties of the group can include:

- Organize social events on the farm.
- Help the farmer to determine the share price.
- Recruit members.

Thoughts on core groups

Molly Bartlett, Silver Creek Farm

Our first core group meeting took place one cold Sunday in January with an invited group of some fifteen members. We prepared an agenda of issues that we wanted both their advice and opinions on. That first meeting was great! Right away we realized what a valuable group of people we had to work with. They brought to the table a mixed bag of expertise and some ideas for improving this missing component of community.

Naturally, agenda issues change from year to year. One year we asked our core group to help us in retiring a specific farm debt. We provided them with a detailed financial picture and the work began. These financial facts, more than anything else, created our most popular level of membership, the *Working Core*. This plan allows for a minimum of one-third of our sharers to join at a discounted fee and with a commitment to help with the harvesting and distribution jobs. Bingo! We not only were able to reduce our nagging labor costs but the door to community was cracked open.

The formation of the core group has had a tremendous impact on our doing business as a CSA farm. I am certain that this group has influenced our high member retention rate, which hovers around 75%.

The future of our farm is more certain than that of many small farms. We realize the farm is much more than a source of food and fiber. It is a place where like-minded people come together to learn, enjoy, and participate in the cycles of growing. With the continuing support and interest of our dedicated sub-community—our core group •

- Create a program for kids.
- Oversee distribution sites or work parties.
- Write the newsletter or contribute to it.
- Maintain the website.
- Deal with excess produce.
- Communication coordinator for work parties, events, missed pick ups, or change of dates.
- Maintain the books, do the budget.

More ideas can be found in the sidebar stories, with thoughts from several growers.

Member Retention

Why do some members stay loyal to a farm for years and others quit after a year or two? Members come and members go, but the most successful farms are those that keep people coming back year after year. Everything we do on a CSA farm will affect this issue, since a deficiency in either the agricultural or cultural (working with people) side of the operation will affect who returns year after year.

The first rule to learn is this: When members leave, don't take it personally! People move, their priorities change, they start their own gardens or they travel. Remember, too, that CSA is not for everyone. It simply does not fit everyone's needs and lifestyle.

Quality

- Grow quality produce — *organic* no longer means runty or blemished.
- Quality refers more to flavor than appearance, though: CSA members know that a crooked bell pepper or a carrot with extra legs tastes just as good.

The Right Mix

Variety cuts both ways.

- Many people say that they join a CSA for the variety and challenge of unusual vegetables.
- It is important to have plenty of the basics, like green beans, tomatoes, and carrots.
- Ask your members what they prefer in a simple questionnaire.
- Too *little* variety can be a disappointment. Strive for a mix and quantity that can be used for meal planning.

Connect!

More than any other type of farm, the CSA farm involves working with people. The alliance between farmer and farm member goes beyond the obvious needs of fairness, honesty, equity. When people come back to the farm year after year it is because there is a connection. Many members feel that your farm is "their" farm and they have a stake in its success. Those who introduce you as "their" farmer are more likely to come back next year. Much of this is fostered through your communications with members. See Chapter 3. **Surveys** help members feel they are part of the farm by providing feedback on everything from produce preferences to the time of pick-up. Let your members speak to you. See the survey article in appendix B.

The Farm Experience

Oscar Wilde once said, "consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative." But it may be the hallmark of a successful CSA farm. Remember:

- If your produce is always washed and bagged for members, keep doing it.
- If it is laid out for people to choose, keep that up.
- Try not to change pickup days, times or locations.

Guiding Principles for the CSA Farm

John Peterson, Angelic Organics CSA

Start with a mission statement and guiding principles. Michael Gerber's book *The E-Myth Revisited* helps one create these things. If the whole central picture for the farm is located on one page, then it is accessible and comprehensible. It's a tricky thing to create when you are a CSA, because the farmer really lives the life completely, and shareholders live the CSA life in a much different way. But shareholders are an important component of the farm, so who creates the mission and guiding principles?

When we the farmers finally got around to creating the mission statement and guiding principles, we wondered to what degree the core group should be involved. We realized then that they were an advisory board, not a board of directors. As the farmers, we needed to declare ourselves and what we were about, since the farm is so hugely our own lives, then ask for comments about that. We might modify or reconsider, but we did not want the core group to have the power to reshape our farm without our consent.

A different situation, requiring a different approach, is the CSA farm that gets its *continuity* from the core group. The farmer comes and goes. The core group stays. But a mission statement and guiding principles are still important. If the declaration is not there, people won't know what they are getting into, and they can easily project their own agendas onto the farm •

Change

At Five Springs Farm, we have made changes over the years. We think they have all been for the better, but some have caused problems. Confusion continues years later over the definition of a share when we changed it in the second year. On the other hand, after carefully surveying the members we went from bagging the shares to spreading things out for members to choose with success •

This is not to say that change for good reason or by popular (member) demand is to be avoided. But the significance of consistency points to the importance of planning. Communication is the key when you do need to make changes.



- Talk to other CSA Farmers.
- Read up on the workings of the CSA Farm; look at the different ways farmers have set CSAs up.
- Purchase the book *Sharing the Harvest* by Elisabeth Henderson (see resources).

Your Farm is Special

Events can provide a direct link to the farm. Many opportunities can be found to invite everyone out for a potluck lunch, farm tour, apple cider pressing or what have you. One grower commented that even though attendance was not high at his events, surveys suggested that his members just liked knowing they were available. Others report high rates of attendance.

Consider the significance of **the little extras** that you can do – the flowers, the cider parties, or the hot tea on a cool autumn day.

Get things right from the start

- Visit neighboring CSA Farms at critical times – like harvest and share preparation or pickup – with a notebook in hand

Variety and Choice

A member who had both very satisfactory and unsatisfactory experiences in different CSA farms cited lack of variety as the key. One farm took pains to supply a variety each week in categories like "veggies to eat raw," "veggies to cook," decorative and special items (like honey, eggs or herbs). There were plenty of options for meal preparation. At another farm the variety she received was often very limited, and it was difficult to build a menu for week or even for a few meals.

People like **choice**. We are used to grocery stores where an assortment for any recipe can be found. Many farms are giving members more choice; some lay out crops in buffet-style at pickup. Some will customize the share according to preferences (This can be logistically very difficult on a large scale, though). Growers using the farmers market have experimented with a 'debit' system where members 'shop' for their share from the grower's table against a prepaid amount •

- Subscribe the *Community Farm* Newsletter (see resources).

- Make sure you are up to the challenge of growing many varieties of crops and keeping them coming. Practice!

Expectations

Little can compare with the disappointment of having expectations that are not met. One trick is finding the 'right' members for your particular farm. This may take time. Remember :

- Being a CSA member is a unique experience and is not for everyone. Communicate the concepts and your own farm's procedures carefully and fully so members know what to expect.
- When your members recruit others, they will have a better idea of what to expect .
- Offer trial periods if possible (2 to 3 weeks).
- Offer cookbooks or recipes to help the cook.
- Offer rebates or even have your share "money back guaranteed" – an unhappy farm member can wreak havoc with a farm and few if any will take you up on the offer.
- Be realistic in *your* expectations as well. After your best efforts, people will quit your CSA. It is important that you do not take it personally. You will never please everyone, and this is not your goal.

Other Ideas

- Collaborate with other farmers to increase the varieties of produce or related products (like maple syrup or bread);

- Don't give out *too much* produce. People do not want to waste the veggies they can't handle. Some growers report this as a frequent reason that members do not return.
- Some growers don't offer time-consuming but popular items like green beans or strawberries. If you are considering dropping them, offer as U-Pick instead.
- Loss of 10% or 20% of your members each year is not usually considered a problem. If your turnover is closer to 50% see if you can find a reason.
- Ask for a commitment for the following year while still in the previous season; consider offering discounted rates for early deposits.
- Set up a buddy system for new members.

Porter Farm CSA

Tasks that the core group assumes include:

- Distribution coordination: Our farm is 45 minutes from the two urban areas we serve. Core group members get a list of members in their area. Before the season starts, they invite them to the distribution site for their group (sometimes, but not always their home) and talk about the CSA. Each person signs up to go to the farm one Saturday of the season to pick up veggies for all the people in the group and deliver them to the distribution site.
- The core group conducts surveys of the membership once or twice a year. The feedback goes to the farmer.
- The core group can run a phone tree if necessary.
- Each member gets a weekly pickup-reminder phone call from a core group person.
- The core group meets several times a season and sorts out various jobs, such as marketing, seeking new markets, articles for the newsletter, festival organization.
- Core group people can answer some questions.
- Write a newsletter for the farm (core group members prepare a one page newsletter each week between the times that I put a 4 page one together, about every 3 weeks).
- This year we will have a brainstorming session *without* the farmer present to do some creative thinking about marketing the CSA.
- Create a listing of CSA owned businesses willing to give discounts to CSA members.
- Make cookbooks available (*A to Z Foodbook* from MACSAC or *The Real Dirt on Food* from Angelic Organics are options – see Resources for contacts and other cookbooks).
- Set up a T-shirt design contest and get T-shirts printed with the winning design.