



Rose Skora

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# Direct Marketing Meat

Whether you are currently a meat producer, or thinking of starting a livestock business and selling directly to consumers, there are some important things to consider. Selling meat directly to consumers is completely different from selling animals through commodity market outlets such as auctions, livestock sales yards or commission agents.

The good news is that more and more consumers are demanding to know how their food is produced and are willing to pay for a high-quality, local product that meets their food safety, health and animal care standards. With recent scares about foot-and-mouth and mad cow disease, along with concerns about bio-terrorism affecting our food supply, many customers are demanding locally produced meats. With the ability to produce a higher quality, healthy, fresher and tastier product, meat producers have a great opportunity to tap into these local markets.

However, there is a reason why not all meat producers have made the switch to direct marketing. By virtue of its description, direct marketing involves taking out the middleman. Someone needs to take on the roles that a middleman plays including processing, packaging, labeling, marketing and distribution. Being prepared to take on those roles or having another member of the family or business take them on is key to becoming a successful direct marketer of meat.

Some of the major items to consider as you are creating a direct marketing meat business follow.

## Rules and regulations

One of the first calls to make when considering a direct marketing meat business is to your Division of Food Safety regional office. When selling meat directly, whether it is on-farm, at a farmers' market, to stores and restaurants, through a web site, or through other sales outlets, there are a variety of local, state and federal rules and regulations of which you need to be aware. Additionally, you may need to get one or multiple licenses based on how you are selling your product. The Division of Food Safety can also provide you with the information you will need to include on the product labels.

## Processing

In some parts of the state, finding adequate processing facilities is becoming an issue for meat direct marketers. If you don't have a relationship with a processing plant, it would be advisable to begin looking into options sooner rather than later. Start having discussions with potential processors about the number of animals you will need processed. Can they handle the number you would be bringing? Once you develop a customer base, you don't want to lose customers because your processing facility can't keep up with your demand.

Ask if they are willing to work with you on specific or different cuts of meat, and if they will collaborate on recipes for processed products such as sausages. Discuss with them how they currently package meat and see if they can and/or are willing to work with you on different packaging options. You may want to ask if the processor would label your products for you.

## Marketing

It is critical to find the right person who will be the “representative” for your business. This will most likely be the primary person with whom your customers and business associates interact. If this person isn’t friendly, honest, extremely knowledgeable and willing to actively seek out sales and customers, you may not have a winning combination for a successful business. This person is a crucial element to success. Sit down with your family and/or business partners to evaluate everyone’s skills and abilities and pick the best person or people to act as your “marketing department.”

## Marketing research

Along with finding the right person to represent your business as a marketer, you will need to find out what your market is. Who is your target customer? What is your product? Will you be focusing on wholes, halves and quarters or supplying a variety of cuts? Do you want to sell on-farm, at farmers’ markets or to restaurants and grocery stores? Narrowing in on who your customers are and what they want will help you decide on the products to specialize in. Why will a potential customer buy from you and what products will they buy? Are grass-fed animals important to your target customer? What about organic? Is a ready-made product important? Will customers know how to cook the product? Will they need help understanding how to prepare your product in order to be a repeat customer? While time-consuming, market research is another key component to success.

## Distribution

Distribution is a challenge faced by many direct marketers. It’s even more complicated for meat marketers because refrigeration or freezer space is necessary if you will be transporting your product to other locations. Once you identify your target customers and how you will reach out to serve them, you should determine how you will get the product to them. Some farmers carry freezers on a trailer and set them up at farmers’ markets; others carry their products in large coolers; still others have made the switch to a refrigerated vehicle. You need to decide what works best for you. Keep in mind that this is another area where you’ll need to work with a representative from the Division of Food Safety to make sure you comply with local and state regulations.

Direct marketing meat has a strong future in Wisconsin and many existing farmers are having incredible success with it. For further information about direct marketing meat in Wisconsin, the publication *Direct Marketing Meat* (A3809) serves as a complete guide and includes detailed information about rules and regulations, marketing, processing and much more. It can be downloaded from the UW-Extension web site at [cecommerce.uwex.edu](http://cecommerce.uwex.edu). Click on “Agriculture” and then “Direct Marketing.”

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