

Increasing Access to Nutritious, Local Food for Senior Citizens

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Brief Description:

We are highlighting FarmersWeb (www.farmersweb.com), an online marketplace designed to connect wholesale buyers with local farms. In this case, we propose that senior citizen organizations, like Meals on Wheels, could use FarmersWeb to procure local ingredients and products for their meals. This leads to numerous other 'best possibilities,' one of which we highlight in our Perspective.

This submission was selected as part of a national challenge issued to leaders in all communities seeking new "best practices" and "best possibilities" for the future of nutrition and aging.

A little more than a year ago, my partners and I noticed a missing link in the food industry—there was no easy way for wholesale buyers (like restaurants) to connect with farms in their area. If a restaurant wanted to source local food, they would have to first find and research the farms, then call or email to compare available products and prices, and finally place orders and maintain vendor accounts with multiple farms. For most chefs, this just took too much time. On the flip side, farms that wanted to sell to wholesale buyers had no way of easily publicizing their availability to the buyers or taking orders. It was also difficult for them to handle billing and collections in a manner that provides the quick cash flow small farms need. That's where we come in—FarmersWeb is a site that acts as a sourcing tool for restaurants and at the same time provides much of the back-office support that farms need. By making buying and selling local food easier, we hope to not only boost the local agricultural economy but also to increase everyone's ability to eat seasonally and locally.

And this includes our senior citizens. The aging network faces the same challenges that the restaurant industry faced, in terms of how to provide easier access to fresh, local food. There are organizations that do a fantastic job of providing food to senior citizens in need, such as Meals on Wheels, but often these meals do not include local farm-fresh ingredients. Simply by using FarmersWeb to procure some of their ingredients, those organizations can easily source local products in minutes either for delivery or for

pick-up at a nearby farmers' market. The site is designed to be very easy to use, so there's no staff training necessary—if you've ever bought anything online, you'll know how to use FarmersWeb.

Of course, price is another consideration that these organizations face when finding their food. Many of the farms that we work with have different pricing levels for different types of customers, or are more than willing to give discounts for bulk orders. For example, one of our farms in the Hudson Valley region of New York sells his vegetables to New York City schools at a lower rate, since he's a big supporter of feeding local produce to our kids. This same mentality would apply to senior citizen organizations. And leaving aside any sort of personal belief, giving discounts for bulk orders just makes good business sense for these farms since it helps them make sure less of their product goes to waste before they can sell it. The FarmersWeb team is always available and happy to help broker any of these deals to make it more affordable to bring local food to our seniors.

Some might question the necessity of bringing local food to senior citizens—why worry about where it comes from when the most important thing is simply getting our elders fed? There are many ways to answer this question. First, by definition, food coming from local farms is less processed than the stuff coming from large commercial food conglomerates. Even if you're buying non-produce items from a local producer, like jams, butter, or bread, these items tend to have less preservatives and additives in them.

Second, because farms who can sell to customers in their area don't need to plan for long-distance transport and storage, their fruits and vegetables require less wax and spray than an apple coming from, say, Argentina. And these farms are free to grow varieties of plants selected for flavor and nutrient content, not just whatever variety is the hardiest and easiest to ship. This is especially true of delicate items like tomatoes—in the 1990s, scientists were able to identify the genes in tomatoes that controlled ripening, and were able to then use that information to slow down the ripening process, allowing tomatoes to be shipped longer distances and have a longer shelf life. However, slowing down the ripening process also meant slowing down the development of flavors and phyto chemicals, depriving us of that delicious peak-of-summer 'tomatoey' taste and the antioxidants that tomatoes have become famous for.

Third, using local food promotes food safety: as the distance the produce has to travel becomes shorter, the risk of being contaminated by pathogens decreases. And almost more importantly, when there's an e coli scare the government can often point out

where the problem originated but not necessarily where those products ended up. If you know that the spinach in your refrigerator was grown by a neighboring family farm, you know for sure that it's safe to eat. If you don't know where it was grown, you won't be so confident.

And finally, although this is not directly related to the nutritional benefits, buying local means that the money you spend stays in your community. A thriving and dynamic community is more likely to be able to provide for all its citizens, including our seniors.

So, there are clearly numerous reasons why we should not only focus on getting food to our senior citizens, but also ensure that as much of it as possible is from local farms and producers. Encouraging Meals on Wheels and other like-minded organization to buy as many products as possible through FarmersWeb is a very easy place to start—they won't need to devote any new staff to sourcing local products, because FarmersWeb has done all the legwork in researching area farms and getting them set up and ready to accept orders.

We're currently up and running in New York, and we have plans to expand nationwide within the year. As we move to each new community, the FarmersWeb team will be responsible for opening up the platform to those community's farms, and we will look to The National Resource Center on Nutrition and Aging and other like-minded organizations in spreading the word to senior-citizen centered meal providers.

Once this 'best practice' is put into place, it lends itself to more creative ways of increasing access and affordability of local food for senior citizen organizations. One idea that we would love to implement is the idea of diverting extra product from farmers' markets to these organizations. Quite often, a farm brings down more produce than he ends up selling at the market. Unless the farmer attends markets every day, he's faced with the prospect of all that extra produce going bad before the next market comes around. It would be better for him if he could unload that produce at a steep discount rather than take a loss, and it would certainly be wonderful for a senior citizen organization to pick up that extra produce at a great price! If the farmer could post on FarmersWeb his discounted products, then the organizations can easily see which farms have extra products, where they are, and reserve their order online. They can then pick up the products, or perhaps a partner organization can organize some sort of volunteer logistics program to get the food from the markets to the senior citizen centers.

Although this is still just a 'best possibility' for us, it would not be difficult to implement. FarmersWeb would need to develop some minor additional functionality on the site and continue our outreach to farms at farmers' markets that would be interested in using this innovative approach to unload excess product.

Things start to get really exciting once you realize that this idea is just one of many that can easily be put into place once the basic online marketplace and network of farms and senior citizen organizations is thriving. Technology, and particularly the Internet, is a powerful tool that can be used to bring efficiency to the food industry and get local food to senior citizens in all communities. With your support and creativity, we look forward to moving ahead with the solutions we have outlined above and meeting the challenge posed by this summit today. Thank you.