

# DIRECT MARKETING STRATEGIES

## SELLING TO INDIVIDUALS: BUYING CLUBS TO U-PICK



Farms interested in selling directly to consumers have many options in Washington. This is a very dynamic and creative marketing arena. To get you started, this fact sheet provides an overview of several of the most common ways of selling directly to individuals who will eat, wear, experience, or otherwise use your farm products.

### This fact sheet includes information on:

- Buying clubs.
- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA).
- Farm stands.
- Farmers markets.
- Internet and mail order sales.
- U-Pick.

## Buying Clubs

Buying clubs have been used for decades as a way for people to access products and share the savings of purchasing in bulk. Updated for today, they can also be used as a direct marketing strategy for fresh farm products. Borrowed in part from the success of wine clubs and community-based natural foods distribution networks, buying clubs organize individuals so they can easily place and receive orders in a cooperative and collective way.

The structure of buying clubs varies, as does how often deliveries are made and how orders are placed. Buying clubs can be made up of neighbors, coworkers, church members, family members, social groups, or others who organize to access high-quality, fresh foods direct from the farm. Often buying clubs seek bulk or wholesale discounts by placing a consolidated order with delivery to a single designated “drop-off” location such as someone’s home or business, where members go to pick up their orders.

One of the most famous buying club farmer-practitioners is Joel Salatin of Polyface Farm in Virginia, [polyfaceyum.com](http://polyfaceyum.com). There are a number of good resources for starting a buying club online, such as [startabuyingclub.com](http://startabuyingclub.com).

## Benefits of selling through a buying club

- Gives customers an option to “pay as you go.”
- Relatively efficient means of distributing to and cultivating customers that don’t live near the farm.
- Scalable and flexible strategy both in terms of products offered and number of clubs developed.
- Excellent means of building relationships and customer loyalty.
- Can work well for larger volume sales of seasonally abundant crops such as berries, tree fruits, and winter storage crops

## Challenges of selling through a buying club

- Depends on finding reliable people to host/coordinate delivery sites.
- Requires good information management and technology to track customers, orders, payments, and deliveries.
- Distribution often requires drivers and trucks (preferably refrigerated), and includes fuel expense and maintenance.
- Requires initial investment in developing sufficient number of buying club members.

## Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a successful model for consumers to connect to a farm and buy local, seasonal food directly from a farmer. A CSA is a direct agreement between a farm and its customers, or “members,” who buy a “share” of the harvest for a set price and defined period of time. The share is a mixed box (or a bag) of what is harvested each week during the season. Some offer a choice of different sizes of shares, while others have only a single size. Members pick up their shares on the farm or at a drop-off location (e.g., a local business, member’s house, farmers market). Some CSA farms make individual home deliveries.

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Many CSAs in the Northwest operate for the main growing season (late spring to mid fall), usually for a total of 18 to 24 weeks. Some CSA farms offer year-round or winter shares, which are well positioned to serve shoppers when farmers markets close for the season and can generate farm income in the off-season.

Farmers can design their CSA so that customers pay up front at the beginning of the season or in installments. Generally, members pay in advance, providing working capital directly to the farm when it is needed most. In theory, the members also share in the risk if the harvest is late or has other problems.

While most CSAs provide fresh vegetables and some fruit, some feature or include dried beans, grains, farmstead cheeses, eggs (chicken and duck), meat, fiber, and flowers, as well as value-added products such as cider, jams, honey, nut butters, or salsa. Sourcing additional products through creative partnerships with like-minded farms can be a win-win-win. The key is transparency. Clearly communicate if you are a cooperative CSA or pooling product, and list the names of farms involved. This is critical for integrity and maintaining customer trust in the farm and CSAs in general.

CSA members expect to hear directly from the farm. With each delivery, most CSAs include a printed or emailed newsletter of farm happenings, a description of what's in the box, and recipes. There are a variety of software programs designed to help farms manage the high volume of direct relationships with members, crop rotations, online ordering, and delivery scheduling such as [CSAaware.com](http://CSAaware.com), [Farmigo.com](http://Farmigo.com), [barn2door.com](http://barn2door.com), and others.

To encourage employees' healthy eating, some employers allow CSA deliveries to their workplaces. For example, WA Wellness, in partnership with WSDA, encourages farms to deliver CSAs to employees at state agencies. Learn more at [hca.wa.gov](http://hca.wa.gov) by searching "CSA Delivery at State Worksites."

## Benefits of selling through CSAs

- Pre-sales allow you to plan production, have a secure market for your harvest, and get early-season cash flow.
- You set prices and have flexibility to choose varieties and quantities that go into the box each week.
- An excellent CSA builds a loyal customer base for all of a farm's products.
- Members can feel invested in the farm's success and may participate in on-farm events, recruit other members for drop-off sites, and help in times of hardship.
- CSA farmers can educate members directly about new varieties, products, and agriculture.
- A CSA does not require individual packaging or grading/sizing, and it minimizes transportation.

## Challenges of selling through CSAs

- Requires a complex crop mix and production plan to deliver a variety of consistent quality products every week.
- Farms must dedicate time to developing a relationship with members, responding to individual customer's needs, complaints, and praises.
- It takes time to manage and write the weekly newsletter and/or recipes, and a willingness to share personal stories.
- A high turnover of CSA customers from season to season can increase marketing costs.
- Farms need to arrange and manage drop-off locations.

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WSU Extension's publication "Starting a CSA in Washington State: An Overview of Considerations" is a helpful resource. Search for it by name at, [pubs.cahnrs.wsu.edu](http://pubs.cahnrs.wsu.edu).

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## Farm Stands

Farm stands are another well-established means of selling directly to customers, especially in agricultural areas with fresh market products and ample tourist and local traffic. Farm stands come in every shape and size, from casual “honor system” stands, to year-round, full-service storefronts with refrigerators and freezers with value-added products and prepared foods. Typically, in a good location, farm stand sales outperform other direct marketing options in part because they are open more hours per season. Staffing costs can hinder a farm stand’s viability. Consider open or staffed hours only when there is regular demand. Advertising, an attractive and festive atmosphere, and good roadside signage that follows local zoning regulations are key components of farm stand success. It’s essential that passersby see you are open and have time to stop safely.

### Benefits of selling at farm stands

- Flexible days and times to be open are set by the farm; this can be especially effective on a seasonal basis.
- For great locations with lots of traffic, they can leverage existing assets.
- The farm sets the product mix, and they are a viable outlet for non-standard sizes, seconds, limited or excess quantities, or other special products.
- Limited packaging, labeling, and transportation required.
- An opportunity to tell customers the farm’s unique story and differentiate product with a sense of place.

### Challenges of selling at farm stands

- Sales can be unpredictable with traffic flow, or competition from other farm stands or outlets with similar products.
- Staffing can be tricky during the growing season.
- There may be significant start-up costs, including capital investment, possible zoning, building permits, or other licensing requirements.
- Adequate storage or refrigeration may be needed to maintain product quality.
- Increased exposure and possible liability when people come on your property.

## Farmers Markets

Farmers markets provide one of the most common and familiar means of selling directly to customers. There are approximately 170 farmers market locations in Washington State that collectively attract millions of shoppers each year. These shoppers are looking to buy from local farms and to eat fresh, flavorful, unique, and nutritious foods. Some are looking for a good deal or to buy in bulk; others want to “vote with their food dollar;” and many enjoy the special experience of shopping at a farmers market.

Farms of all sizes and from every corner of the state sell at farmers markets. Vendors pay a stall fee and agree to follow market rules. The farmers market organizers then work to attract customers by recruiting other excellent vendors so there is the right overall product mix, creating a festive atmosphere, planning events, and advertising. This partnership between market organizers and vendors allows producers to focus on sales on market days.

At the individual vendor level, how products are presented, booth design, and signage are critical to sales. Vendors must follow all state and county regulations for direct sales, food handling, and food safety. Fortunately, there are resources available to help new farmers market vendors learn about specific farmers markets, and navigate the application process, market-day requirements and best practices, as well as licenses and permits. Start by referencing specific products in this handbook, asking the market manager for guidance, or contacting the Washington State Farmers Market Association at [wafarmersmarkets.org](http://wafarmersmarkets.org).

### Benefits of selling at farmers markets

- Farmers markets are very popular, and many shoppers come ready to buy from “their farm.”
- Farmers can set their own prices and get full retail value for their products.
- Market entry can be relatively easy, even with small volumes and non-standard sizes.
- Building relationships through interaction with customers is an opportunity to facilitate repeat sales, educate about products, receive valuable customer feedback, and promote other market channels such as a CSA, farm stand, agritoursim events, or special products not sold at the market.
- There is a strong sense of community and shared purpose.

## Challenges of selling at farmers markets

- Requires excellent customer service and sales skills, enjoying people, an eye for presentation, and physical endurance for booth set up/take down and long days.
- Picking a farmers market that needs your specific products, volume, and price points at the right time of year is critical.
- Farmers markets are labor intensive, with harvesting, packing, prepping, traveling, selling, and unloading for every market.
- There are no guaranteed sales; bad weather or competing events may keep customers away.
- It may be difficult to get space in well-established markets.

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**Selling to individuals via SNAP EBT, matching incentives, and Farmers Market Nutrition Programs.** Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), matching fruit and vegetable incentive programs (e.g. Double Up Bucks, Fresh Bucks, Veggie Rx, etc.), and Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) and Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Programs (FMNP) increase access for low-income individuals and families to healthful foods sold by direct-marketing farmers.

The most common way for farmers to make these sales is at a farmers market. Today, SNAP Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards are used instead of “food stamps” for purchasing SNAP eligible items. Many farmers markets accept SNAP EBT payments at a payment station where shoppers can swipe their EBT card in exchange for tokens. Market vendors accept tokens from shoppers and turn them in later for payment. For SNAP incentive programs, the specific process for accepting coupons can vary. The Washington State Farmers Market Association (WSFMA) provides information on how farms can participate, [wafarmersmarkets.org](http://wafarmersmarkets.org), or 206-706-5198 .

In some cases, eligible direct marketing farmers can be authorized as retailers by USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) and accept SNAP EBT payments at a farm store or for a CSA share. Approved direct marketing farmers with an FNS retailer number should contact the Washington State Department of Health Services’ (DSHS) EBT vendor, Fidelity Information Services (FIS)

at 1-877-262-9271 about free use of SNAP EBT Point of Sale (POS) equipment. Information about how to apply to accept SNAP benefits and receive an FNS number is on the USDA FNS SNAP website, [fns.usda.gov/snap](http://fns.usda.gov/snap).

For WIC and Senior FMNP, farms must be authorized by the Washington Department of Health to directly accept the paper vouchers that customers use to purchase fruits, vegetables and fresh herbs (and honey for seniors only). Information and the application is online at [doh.wa.gov](http://doh.wa.gov), by searching for “farmers market.”

Farmers can attract and serve SNAP and FMNP customers with clear signage, in appropriate languages, that lets customers know they can use their benefits to shop. Many signage resources are available to vendors. Ask the market manager or the WSFMA for information. Farmers can also make it easy for shoppers to find eligible products and can bunch and price produce to match set voucher amounts, so shoppers can maximize their value.

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## Internet and Mail Order Sales

Internet and mail order sales are a valuable way to reach customers throughout the U.S. with unique, seasonal, and value-added products. Online customers are looking for gifts, hard-to-find specialty products with a sense of place, and convenience. Value-added food products shipped to customers are required to be processed in a WSDA-licensed Food Processing Facility.

Shipping farm products directly to customers outside of the U.S. requires planning ahead due to different countries’ custom regulations and jurisdictions.

With technology and many delivery options, virtually any product can be shipped. Having an excellent website, database, and information management system, and accepting online payment are especially important for internet and mail order sales. See the “E-Commerce” Fact Sheet for more information.

## Benefits of selling through the internet and mail order

- Websites and mail order can reach a large customer base, independent of where the farm is located.
- Ordering through a well-designed website can be more convenient for customers (both retail and wholesale).
- Websites are highly sharable via social media, with built-in marketing tools to facilitate connections to your target markets, build brand awareness, and generate sales.
- Receiving customer orders or inquiries online reduces data entry. Some programs autopopulate a database for you.
- Using packaging and inserts that tell the farm story is a marketing opportunity to build customer connections to the farm and generate repeat sales.

## Challenges of selling through internet and mail order

- Often requires spending money on advertisements to reach the target market.
- Someone will need to maintain the electronic marketing tools (website, email applications, social media postings, etc.), as well as keep up with online sales trends and social media tools.
- Written and phone communication with customers is critical, including answering questions, creating package inserts, email confirmations, promotions, or phone follow-ups.
- Demands an investment in design and cost of quality packaging and shipping materials.
- Need to provide high value and make your product special, to increase frequent return customers.
- Requires investment in brandbuilding, advertising, and marketing the farm name and products.
- E-commerce is highly competitive.

## U-Pick

In Washington, U-Pick is popular primarily for berry, cut flower, tree fruit, pumpkin, and Christmas tree growers. U-Pick farms need to be prepared for special considerations that arise when having the public come onto the farm. It is a good idea to research liability insurance and waivers before opening to the public. Washington State law limits some liability for farmers offering agritourism experiences. Please see the “Culinary and Agritourism” fact sheet for more information. Be sure to offer a clean site for visitors with parking and restroom facilities. Rules for visitors, container options, and prices should be clearly posted to ensure the best experience. U-Pick farms can be a community meeting place, and they are also a great family activity. U-Pick farms have tourism appeal, too. Like farm stands, U-Pick farm’s are often advertised with roadside signage, farm map listings, and as activities in local visitor guides.

## Benefits of selling u-pick

- The days and times for operation are flexible.
- Opportunity to direct market volumes of a single seasonal crop during it’s harvest season.
- Keeps packaging, labeling, transportation, and harvesting costs to a minimum.
- Potential to develop a loyal customer base that returns year after year.
- Potential to market additional farm products to U-Pick customers with a farm stand or special order.

## Challenges of selling u-pick

- Increases risk and may increase liability insurance costs with more people coming on to the farm.
- May incur damage or lose some product in fields or farm from customers.
- A location far from a population base or urban area can limit customer access.
- Advertising is crucial. Website and marketing information must be accurate and up to date so that customers get correct information, including the current status of the crop and dates available.
- Managing and staffing the operation can be demanding at the height of the season.

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The National Sustainable Agricultural Information Service (ATTRA) has an excellent “Marketing Tip Sheet Series” available free by searching online at [attra.ncat.org/marketing](http://attra.ncat.org/marketing).

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- 11. Direct Marketing in Washington State
- 13. Selling Online: E-Commerce
- 14. Culinary and Agritourism
- 23. WSDA Food Processor License and Facilities
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- 48. Selling Ready-to-Eat Foods