


## Organizing a Network: What you should consider before you begin



Organizing a local farmers' network can be very rewarding. It can also take some time and effort. This sheet is meant to highlight some of the things to consider before deciding to start organizing a network, and help you start thinking about when, how, and with whom to start it.

### **Making time**

There's no hard and fast rule about how much time it takes to coordinate a network. It depends on the kinds of network activities you're seeking to take on, and how willing folks are to participate. For example,

- Arranging farm tours: if folks are reluctant to participate, it may take some coaxing and explaining; on the other hand if a few folks are ready to host a gathering, all you may have to do is set up the times and advertise. Taking time to make individual phone calls just prior to the event makes a huge difference in increasing turnout. It not only reminds people, it let's them know that it matters to someone if they come.
- Setting up an email list serve: This isn't difficult, but takes some up-front investment of time to gather email addresses and invite fellow farmers to subscribe to the list.
- Coordinating a bulk order: depending on how many farms are participating and how complicated the order is, placing the order and coordinating the pickup can take some significant time, but the cost savings can make it worthwhile.
- Multi-farm events or wholesale accounts: depending on the scale this can be many hours/week for long periods of time or perhaps even a full-time commitment.

Many organizers have found that the largest investment of time and energy comes at the beginning to get the ball rolling and decreases as time goes on.

### **Sharing the responsibility**

One way to make the time commitment more manageable is by finding ways to share the responsibility with others. In fact, in some farmer networks a work component is a requirement to be a member. This works best when there are discrete tasks and clear expectations. For example, one person maintains the email list, another person is in charge of sending out reminders for events, several different people coordinate separate bulk orders, etc.

### **Compensation**

If you're committing dozens of hours a week to network activities, consider finding a way to build in compensation for yourself that everyone can agree on. For example, if you're organizing the bulk order, maybe you get a slightly bigger discount. If you're arranging multi-farm sales to restaurants, perhaps you get a percentage of the sales. Making sure that the organizer is fairly compensated for their time when possible is important to making the arrangement sustainable over the long term.

### **Timing**

It's often best to get started in the off-season when everyone has a little more time. That way you can build momentum before the peak of the season.

### **Welcome New Members**

If you're not the social type, but you want to make this happen, consider partnering with someone who enjoys talking with others so they can help with reminder calls and creating some social glue. For example, it's valuable to have at least one or two people at each gathering who will greet people as they arrive and make them feel welcome.