



HELP THE
Honey
SPEAK

*A Marketing Guide
for Beekeepers with
Naturally-Managed
Apiaries*

YOU'VE MADE THE COMMITMENT

to manage your hives without synthetic chemicals or antibiotics. You know that natural beekeeping is right for the bees, but can it pay off in the market?

This guide was created to help you—the natural beekeeper—maximize the reward for your efforts as a good steward of the bees in your care. Fortunately there's growing demand for foods produced locally without the use of synthetic materials. With honey, this demand is enhanced by growing awareness of bees' importance as pollinators and the environmental challenges they face.

With just a bit of effort and savvy, natural beekeepers can tap into this demand. You may simply want to make your honey stand out from honey produced with synthetic chemicals. You may want to charge a premium, given the extra care and work you have put in. This guide offers tips to help you succeed.

Help the Honey Speak



While there are many ways to assess the quality of fresh produce—aroma, firmness, texture—your customers can detect only the color of the honey. Therefore your packaging—jar *and* label—is important. It should convey the honey within is special and high quality. The section below outlines your packaging options.

Similarly you (or your representatives) have an important role to play educating customers. Many people think “honey is honey” and see no reason to pay a beekeeper \$8 for something that costs \$5 in the supermarket. Yet once they encounter an enthusiastic natural beekeeper, many customers are delighted to connect the taste of a varietal to its floral source, learn about how natural beekeeping helps the bees, and do their part by purchasing honey from natural beekeepers.

Jars

You'll need to decide whether to use glass or plastic, or some combination. Plastic containers include various squeeze containers and the new, inverted jar. They are lightweight and unbreakable, but generally do not communicate the high-quality image you may favor for your honey.

Glass jars come in a variety of shapes and convey the “artisanal” nature of your honey. And glass jars are preferred by customers who avoid storing food in plastic. They are,

however, heavy, so in settings where customers will need to carry the honey some distance, a plastic option or smaller jars might be desirable.

By offering a variety of sizes you accommodate the different needs of your customers. Smaller sizes, including small sample-sizes, are very popular, make great gifts, and tempt new customers to try your honey. Larger sizes offer your regular customers a more economical and convenient option.

Your choice of jar shape should be informed by your vision both of your product and the market for it. Less common shapes may be more expensive but make your product distinctive. The squeeze bear is beloved by children and adults alike, though is very common. A distinctive label on the bears will help distinguish your honey from commercial operations.

Labels

The label is among your most important marketing tools. It speaks for your honey and attracts customers. Just as importantly, having contact information on the label helps people find you once they've finished a jar, or tasted it at a friend's house.



Certain legal requirements must be followed when labeling your honey. To learn them in detail, go to the website of the National Honey Board, www.honey.com, and put “labeling information” in the search box.

You'll see that your label *must* contain three items: 1) the word “honey” as the most conspicuous part; 2) the net weight in pounds or ounces and metric, on the lower third of the label; and 3) your contact information. Be sure to get details on these requirements from the National Honey Board website and assess whether additional label information is required for your operation.

Beekeeping equipment suppliers sell a variety of labels (*see Resources*). These can be ordered imprinted with your contact information and the weights of honey that you sell. The companies offer a variety of attractive designs. However, your label may be used by another beekeeper in your area, minimizing its distinctiveness.

To convey a distinctive image of your apiary and your natural practices, you may favor a custom-designed label that is uniquely yours. A custom label

enables you to integrate a logo and signals that you have a special product, unlike others on the market. *(For inspiration, look at the variety of attractive labels on wine bottles.)*

Do hire a professional to design your label; otherwise it will likely look amateurish. Provide your designer with details on the legal requirements mentioned above. You may be tempted to save money and design it yourself. Resist! This one-time expense is an investment in crafting a unique and professional image for your apiary, for which you will be rewarded over many years.

Custom-made labels should be printed on glossy or semi-gloss stock so they can be wiped clean. You want the labels to remain attractive and legible so customers know where to get replacement honey! Many local and online companies offer label-making services. Be sure you can cover the costs of custom labels in the price you charge for your honey.



SMALLER LABELS

Small sticker-labels are available (*see Resources*) to supplement your main label. These stickers can provide additional information to attract customers, such as “local unprocessed honey,” “creamed honey,” or varietal names like “sourwood” and “clover”. They allow you to keep your main label simple and uncluttered, and to provide customized information about smaller batches.

TAGS

Hang tags are good for more detailed information about your apiary, beekeeping practices, or your favorite honey recipes. The National Honey Board offers hang tags with honey recipes. The jars in the photo at left have large hang tags used as the main label, with additional information on the back side.

RAW

If you're offering raw honey, say so! Many customers appreciate that raw honey tastes and smells better and has healthy enzymes. Commercial honey producers typically destroy honey's delicate flavor and enzymes by heating their honey to expedite the packing process. Similarly, use the words local, unheated, unfiltered, or unstrained—if they describe your honey—to attract the growing customer base looking for unprocessed local honey.



SMALL-BATCH & ULTRA-LOCAL

Natural beekeepers can highlight the ultra-local nature of their honey. Distinguish your honey using a historic or geographic landmark near the apiary, such as “Mount Vernon Honey” or “Smugglers’ Notch Honey”.

If you have hives at different locations, with different floral sources, they probably have distinctive flavors. It requires a bit more work to harvest them separately, but your reward is greater variety of ultra-local products.

If you don't want to separate your harvest by location, but you're harvesting more than once per year, give a seasonal name to each of your harvests, i.e. “Spring Blossoms” or “Autumn Amber”. If you can only manage one harvest, you could simply market the year's honey as “Vintage 2010”. Each of these names offers a conversation starter, and signals the unique flavor of each harvest.

TAMPER-PROOF

Tamper-proof jars enhance consumer confidence. Many jar caps, especially for squeeze bears, come with an inner seal that seals to the jar rim when the cap is tightened. Shrink bands that encircle the cap are easily applied with a hair dryer. The jar top tamper-proof sticker has a strip that extends from the cap down the side of the jar. These come preprinted and can be an attractive addition to your container.

UPC CODE

Many retail outlets require a UPC “bar” code on the jar. Consider whether you'll want this printed separately (requiring a second sticker application on

APIARY CERTIFICATION

Certification can add credibility to your image as a natural beekeeper. Organic certification is out of reach for most beekeepers—it requires thousands of acres of organic forage—so **Certified Naturally Grown** (CNG) developed an apiary certification program to support and encourage natural beekeeping practices. CNG beekeepers don't use in-hive chemical treatments or antibiotics. Annual on-site inspections are conducted by fellow beekeepers.

Certified beekeepers enjoy the legitimacy conferred by participation in a recognized national program. They are given a profile page on the organization's website, and their contact information and photos can be found by customers on CNG's searchable map of certified farms and apiaries. Certified beekeepers may purchase logo stickers and custom-made signs. To find program requirements and participating apiaries, go to www.naturallygrown.org.



each jar), or included on your main label (requiring that all jars with that label are the same size). A separate sticker will give you more flexibility but requires twice as many sticker applications.

Informational Brochures

A professionally designed brochure can highlight your care for the bees and help your customers feel good about supporting a natural beekeeper. CERTIFIED NATURALLY GROWN has developed some flyers for this purpose which you can download or order at www.naturallygrown.org.

Setting the Price

Your naturally produced honey is a unique product, unlike most of the honey on shelves at supermarkets. Most honey can't be identified with a place or a person. Yours can, and that makes it special. Price it accordingly.

The prices you can reasonably charge will depend on your market, competition, and your marketing skills. In general, the prices of beekeepers using synthetic treatments should be your baseline. Find out what it costs you to run your apiary, including time invested (assume an hourly wage) and equipment. For your beekeeping operation to be sustainable, your prices must cover the cost of container, lid, labels and neck tags, and the cost of producing the honey.

Sales Venues

WHICH IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

Below is a listing of possible outlets for honey sales. You may discover additional opportunities in your local community. The best options for you will depend on your resources, the local market, your personal relationships, and your personality. A combination of sales venues is likely to be your best approach.

FACE-TO-FACE SALES

In these venues, the person at the point of sale is critical to your success. Some beekeepers enjoy sharing their knowledge and enthusiasm with prospective customers. Others prefer to deal with bees, not people. If this describes you, find a trusted spokesperson to handle the sales. He or she should be well-informed and enthusiastic about your beekeeping operation. See below for tips on in-person marketing.

ADVANTAGES

- ◉ No shipping costs
- ◉ Efficient access to local customers
- ◉ Direct relationship with customers
- ◉ Encourages repeat sales

DISADVANTAGES

- ◉ Time commitment
- ◉ May require travel
- ◉ Fees to participate may be unaffordable

Venues

- Farmers' Markets
- Craft Shows & Harvest Fairs
- Street Festivals
- Agricultural Fairs
- Holiday Festivals
- Earth Day Celebrations
- Neighborhood events
- ◉ Yard sales
- ◉ Block parties
- ◉ Library fairs
- Children's programs



RETAIL PARTNERSHIPS

Many independent businesses appreciate the opportunity to offer a local product to their customers. (Large grocery chains typically expect a year-round supply of honey, and may require a shelving fee.) Think beyond grocers. Proprietors of businesses where people return regularly might be happy to offer your honey as a nice (perhaps unexpected) service to their customers. Reach out to tourist destinations. Honey is a nice souvenir or gift, a unique product of a particular place. Check your displays at retail outlets periodically. Be sure jars aren't dusty and rotate out any honey that does not show perfectly.

ADVANTAGES

- Efficient: no time marketing on-site and minimal travel
- Reliable shelf presence, not dependent on sporadic events
- Good choice for beekeepers who don't enjoy face-to-face sales

DISADVANTAGES

- A portion of revenue goes to retail partner
- Requires some additional record-keeping

Venues

Independent grocery stores

Health Food Stores

Hair/Nail Salons

Mechanics

Hardware stores

Garden Supply Centers

Restaurants

Tourist attractions

Gift shops

Farm stands

Pick-your-own operations

Bed and Breakfasts

Potter (*who makes honey pots*)

Baker (*who wants honey for baked goods*)

Farmers (*who want to supplement their CSA baskets*)

Farmers (*who host your hives and sell at tailgate markets*)

People who make gift baskets



ONLINE SALES

Online sales can be especially attractive if a) you're in a remote area without many on-site sales opportunities, b) you want to participate in online farmers markets, c) your varietal is sought by people far away, and/or d) you prefer bees to people. If using your own website there will be development and hosting costs. See www.smallfarmcentral.com for affordable options.

ADVANTAGES

- ◉ No time commitment to market on-site
- ◉ Your online “store” is always open

DISADVANTAGES

- ◉ Website development costs (*maybe*)
- ◉ Packing and shipping costs (*maybe*)

Venues

www.localharvest.org

Your own website (*see* www.smallfarmcentral.com)

Online farmers' markets (*see* www.locallygrown.net *to find one nearby*)

OTHER MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES

Besides point-of-sale marketing, there are many ways to publicize your operation.

- ◊ Join your state/regional sustainable agriculture organizations. They typically publish a local food guide and provide other marketing assistance to members.
- ◊ Encourage your local newspapers to run a story and photo about your beekeeping operation.
- ◊ State and local tourism websites often list agricultural producers. Be sure you're included.
- ◊ www.foodroutes.org Their “Buy Fresh, Buy Local” chapters list local producers.
- ◊ www.honeylocator.com The National Honey Board offers a searchable database of participating honey producers.
- ◊ www.naturallygrown.org CNG offers a searchable map of certified apiaries, with links to profile pages which participating beekeepers customize with photos and text.

Tips on In-Person Marketing

PRESENTING THE HONEY

- Display an abundance to increase sales.
- Avoid sticky jars; stickiness is the main consumer complaint about serving honey.
- Mark prices clearly.
- Use crates and stands to show honey at different levels.
- Display a large sign or banner with your apiary name and image and a few descriptive words like “Raw Honey” or “Local Honey”.
- Talk with customers about how your honey is special. For example: no chemical treatments in the hive, bees are not stressed, genetic improvement through natural selection, sustainability of beekeeping, benefits of local honey for people with allergies, other health benefits, etc.
- Feature different varieties.
- Clean spills promptly.

MAXIMIZING FACE-TO-FACE SALES

- Offer free samples, especially if you have more than one variety. Use taster spoons for clean, adequate samples.
- Have supplemental displays: an observation hive, guaranteed to be the center of attention; photos of your beekeeping operation; and/or cleaned empty comb.
- Be available, friendly, and courteous to customers. Avoid extended conversations with just one person, long phone calls, and loud music in headphones.
- Be sure your representatives are properly trained to represent you and your products effectively. Supervise as needed.
- Don't smoke or eat, particularly if you are offering samples.
- Offer free honey recipes and information on substituting honey for sugar in recipes.
- Have a neat stack of business cards readily available.
- Offer a small incentive such as a honey dipper with a large purchase.
- Display honey straws to attract tourists and children.
- Have a neat personal appearance. You want to convey pride in yourself and your products. Consider making a hat or shirt with your apiary name and logo.

Resources

PACKAGING SUPPLIES—JARS AND LABELS

Betterbee Greenwich, NY www.betterbee.com 800 632 3379

Brushy Mountain Bee Farm Moravian Falls, NC
www.brushymountainbeefarm.com 800 233 7929

Dadant & Sons Hamilton, IL www.dadant.com 888 922 1293

Mann Lake Ltd. Hackensack, MN www.mannlakeltd.com 800 880 7694

R.M. Farms Dearborn Heights, MI 734 722 7727 rmfarms@hotmail.com

Rossman Apiaries Moultrie, GA www.gabees.com 800 333 7677

Walter T. Kelly Co. Clarkson, KY www.kelleybees.com 270 242 2012

MANUFACTURERS OF CUSTOM LABELS

Bar Codes www.buyabarcodes.com 888 446 CODE

Growers Discount Labels Tunnel, NY www.growersdiscountlabels.com
800 693 1572

Online Labels www.onlinelabels.com 800 575 2235

HARVESTING A QUALITY PRODUCT

Flottum, Kim. *THE HONEY HANDBOOK: A GUIDE TO CREATING, HARVESTING, AND COOKING WITH NATURAL HONEYS.* Quarry Books, 2009.

Caron, Dewey M. *HONEY BEE BIOLOGY AND BEEKEEPING.* Wicwas Press, 2000.

Conrad, Ross. *NATURAL BEEKEEPING: ORGANIC APPROACHES TO MODERN APICULTURE.* Chelsea Green Publishing, 2007.

Your local beekeepers association.

GRAPHIC DESIGN

- Search the online database at www.creativehotlist.com.
- Contact your local community college or design school.
- Get referrals from people who have good designers.

MARKETING

www.honey.com The website of the National Honey Board

“Shared Wisdom: Selling Your Best at Farmers’ Markets” Instructional DVD ROM/ Video. Funded by USDA Agricultural Marketing Service and New York State Dept. of Agriculture and Markets. Request a copy from shannon.ford@usda.gov or call 202 720 8317.



Certified Naturally Grown (CNG) is dedicated to strengthening sustainable agriculture by offering peer-review certification to farmers and beekeepers who use natural practices free of synthetic chemicals to produce food for their local communities. CNG is a grassroots non-profit organization founded by farmers in 2002.

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