



Building A Successful Local Food Program - Tips for Institutional Buyers -

Start with the Seasonal Low-Hanging Fruit

And that's fruit. Whole fruit requires no extra processing and is easily added as a side dish or healthy dessert without having to change any recipes. The enhanced taste is instantly enjoyed.

Shortlist of Seasonal Swap-Out Options

Pick a handful of items you're regularly buying and have a farm representative or distributor identify which are regionally available. Swap those handful of items for locally-grown goods while they're in season. As you expand your local sourcing program, you can adjust dishes to incorporate more seasonality and explore unique local varieties. But you can start implementing local sourcing with a focused and manageable short list of produce with any menu.

Highlight Seasonal Products

Choose one component of your menu to feature local produce. For instance, you can create a Seasonal Salad Bar, Local Fruit Bar, Local Lunch of the Week, or start a Harvest of the Month program highlighting local seasonal products. Ask an agricultural organization or farmer for a chart showing the seasonal availability of locally grown produce to assist you with menu planning.

Engage Your Distributor

Tell your distributor of your interest in purchasing local and regional food. Ask them to label items that are already in their catalogue that are local and then them to expand these options. If your distributor won't work with you, consider renegotiating your distribution or produce contract to include this availability and outline your local sourcing goals with a focus on small and midscale family farms.

Leverage Off-Contract Flexibility

Regardless of the availability with your main distributor, make sure to utilize your off-contract flexibility to support local farmers and distributors that specialize in local goods. The off-contract percentage is often times about 20% of your total produce purchase, so you can use this margin to start working with local farms and their distributors.

Commit to Communicate with Farmers

Local farmers may not be used to the specifications that your conventional distributor employs. If the produce arrives over-ripe or too varied in size – communicate your expectations to the farmer who can then consider adjusting their practices. If they can't make it work for this year, a demonstrated commitment from the buyer may encourage the grower to plant a different variety that will work better next season. As you move forward, consider entering an agreement with a farmer or cooperative to supply certain crops or products specifically for your facility.

Develop Annual Goals

As with many goals, if you don't measure it, it doesn't matter. Decide where you want to be in one year's time and then create monthly and weekly purchasing targets to get you there. Annual goals can be set as a ratio of your total food buy. The easiest to measure is number of boxes or dollar amount. Our experience indicates that a reasonable goal for the first year is five percent of produce purchases, with the aim of increasing it by five percent each year. Interviews with Foodservice buyers across California indicates most can buy up to 38% of their produce from local sources without confronting significant barriers.

Set Financial Guidelines

To alleviate the anxiety, confusion, and possible disconnect of interest amongst different employees – establish budgetary guidelines. Consider setting a maximum dollar amount, a maximum additional cost per serving or year, or approve the cost for a short-list of items. There is no simple answer to how much more it will cost to 'go local' – but a rough estimate for a basket of items is 5-25% increase. Keep in mind your local produce buy is only a fraction of your food buy which is a small part of your food service budget. Spending more on local food is about investing in a healthier, more sustainable, equitable and better tasting food system. Institutions have the purchasing power to significantly impact our local and global food systems.

Encourage Broad Stakeholder Buy-In

To reach a broad set of resources for local food procurement and to institutionalize the commitment, consider establishing a Local & Sustainable Food Taskforce. Such taskforces are most effective when they consist of employees from various departments – including procurement, finance, dining, nutrition and public relations. A cross-departmental network of supporters facilitates a broader commitment that can outlive the single innovator of the program.

Communicate the Challenges & Benefits to Staff

There are challenges to local sourcing, and it's important for management to anticipate and communicate expectations around these challenges to the procurement and kitchen staff. Make sure everyone acknowledges the extra challenges and in light of the host of benefits – considers it a worthwhile investment. Challenges may include: additional time to work with an additional distributor, different delivery schedules, less consistent sizing, varying colors, processing time, and additional communication time with local growers. Benefits of local sourcing include: fresher produce, increased customer satisfaction, reduced carbon footprint, investment in neighboring family farms and the regional economy, building local food access, preserving agricultural land, brand enhancement, media attention, and richer flavors.

Communicate the Project to the Public

Build a tangible connection between local farms and your customers by featuring details about the farmers in your materials. Consider posting farmer profiles next to their products on the menu, at point-of-sale, include it within the printed and online menu and nutrition materials, hang the 'Buy Fresh Buy Local' banner in your cafeteria. Pictures of the farm and farmers – along with the mileage from the farm to your facility - create powerful connections.

Be Flexible

While communicating your expectations is essential, it is also important to consider which conventions you can live without. For instance, while you may be used to having all your peaches the same exact size – is that necessary for all your recipes? Many small farms don't have the machines, yields, time, or pesticide-intensity that are used to create that uniformity of size and color. Remaining flexible with sizing and coloring can be a huge help to working with local farmers.