

## Pandemic Prompts New Ways to Market Maple

Andrea Caluori

**M**aple farmers experienced a difficult transition last March when the COVID-19 outbreak in North America resulted in the shutting down of sugarhouses to the public, particularly during some of the most crucial weekends for in-person maple sales. Sugarmakers had to quickly pivot in order to make up for lost sales in the sugarhouse as well as from wholesale restaurant and school accounts. This shift brought about some creative thinking and innovative solutions to reach customers and promote maple products. Some successful marketing, sales and agritourism strategies have not only helped producers recover lost sales, but have permanently enhanced their future sales approach and marketing plans.

### Webstores, Social Media, and Advertising

Pam Green of Green's Sugarhouse in Poultney, VT is no stranger to the importance of good marketing when it comes to selling your maple product. At the start of COVID, Green's was getting ready for their maple open house, but like many producers needed to completely shut down public visitation in order to keep everyone safe.

Since then, Pam reports having made up for lost sales due significantly to their already established online presence. "I had a really good website, a really good webmaster, and web sales have doubled from last year," she says. Pam touts the value of having a webstore that is attractive to customers, ad-

vertises their products, and dovetails with a strong Facebook and Instagram presence to help market their product. "Facebook has allowed us to have contact with our customers. Not just the tourists," she explained, "but also the local people who keep you going."

While the upfront investment of time and money to build an online presence can seem daunting, many have found that the pay-off is worth it. Consumers are deferring more to online shopping as a safe way to find food and agricultural products. Additionally, it's an opportunity to tell your maple farm's story and create a unique market for your product. Storytelling is at the heart of marketing – a farm's story is what inspires people to become loyal and returning customers.

A website and social media are easy and great ways to share why your product is special. "From a website perspective the concept of provenance is important," says Jean Lamontagne, Executive Director of the International Maple Syrup Institute. "What makes your farm special and unique?" Sharing those stories that explain who you are, where you are, and how you make your product allows a producer to connect the consumer to the experience of maple through the farm's individual sense of place. This can be in the "About Our Farm" section of a website, in tandem with other website features such as a farm blog and farm shop. Providing customers with the experience of visiting the sugarhouse virtually, par-

ticularly at a time when they are unable to travel, can help recreate an authentic maple experience.

An attractive and easy-to-use webstore provides sugarmakers with a way to sell maple directly to customers remotely. There are a wide range of sales platforms available, many of them simple to implement and easy-to-use from the customer's perspective. When setting up a webstore, Lamontagne also advises designing product packaging that looks good both on the shelf and in pictures, promoting both your farm's unique story and the shared story of maple without our industry. "Make sure the tone of your communication reflects the way the industry works and the way people view maple syrup: it's pure, it's simple, and it's from

the farm," he says. This appeals to the growing interest in natural food ingredients that are local and not overly-processed, while promoting the industry as a whole.

Finally, a strong social media presence provides excellent an advertising opportunity. Even devoting five minutes every couple of days to posting on Facebook or Instagram with an attractive picture from the sugarbush or the sugarhouse that highlights how you make your product will help generate a social buzz, when visitors share your posts with their networks and boost your messages. This can easily translate to more website visits and new customers for the sugarmaker. Social media is free to use – though paid advertising is

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also available and can be very productive as well – and is an important way to share your maple message. No matter how small the operation, social media allows for meaningful direct communication to existing and potential customers.

“This is the ideal time to tell our story,” says Dan Brown of Bonhomie Acres in Fredericktown, Ohio. “Maple is so versatile in cooking with so many different uses and many health benefits. It has the science behind it and a really good story.” When the pandemic limited consumers’ ability to go to restaurants or travel, people turned to the local farm, the small grocery store, and revived their vacant pantries. As more people turn to cooking made-from-scratch meals, it’s a great time to share maple’s story and the many hats it wears as a gourmet ingredient, a health food, and a pantry staple.

With people buying in grocery stores to cook at home more due to COVID-19, wholesale sales have been successful for Bonhomie Acres as well. “A while back someone started the saying ‘make maple a staple,’” Dan recalls. “Perhaps it’s time to bring that part of maple’s story back to the forefront of our marketing strategies.”

## **New Models for Successful Sales**

Quite a few farms and agribusinesses have experienced an increase in demand for their products since the pandemic forced more at-home cooking, as shoppers began thinking differently about how they shop and how they value where their food comes from. With many customers wary of in-person

shopping due to health concerns, some farmers have turned to delivery and curbside pick-up. Curbside pick-up complemented the online web store at Green's Sugarhouse, said Green, particularly when it came to serving the local community. Customers felt more comfortable purchasing items online and then picking it up on-farm. Small roadside farm stands have also become increasingly popular, allowing customers to purchase products and pay through an online sale system such as Venmo, which allows for contactless payment since it's done on a mobile phone.

The pandemic also created a move towards more collaboration, as some larger vegetable producers and farms with already established farm stores looked to bulk up their in-store offerings to include specialty and value-

added products, such as maple, honey, milk, cheese, and fruit in order to provide consumers one-stop shopping similar to a small grocery store experience. Lamontagne says working with local stores and small chains, such as country stores, farm stores, and roadside stands, has proved very successful for maple producers during the pandemic. Other local retail channels can also benefit small producers who can sell their products at the town hardware store, small shops, little groceries, and even the retail section of a rural town's gas station convenience store. These types of collaboration not only strengthen community connections to a product, but create some diversification in a farm's revenue stream.

Chip Williams of Williams Farm

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Sugarhouse in Deerfield, MA sells maple candy to a local orchard and participates in the Sunderland Farm Collaborative, a distribution effort launched early in the pandemic. The Collaborative is a group of farmers located in the Pioneer Valley in Western MA who offer their products collectively as an online marketplace, as a response to the desire to shop locally and smaller. Customers can purchase items online through its webstore and can either pick up their groceries at one of seven locations located in two different counties or they can pay a \$10 fee for home delivery.

Chip enthusiastically praised this new enterprise as integral to helping the farm recover 50% of sales lost due

to the cancellation of the state's maple weekend and their sugarhouse restaurant shutting down. Chip speaks highly of this model and plans to continue participating, dropping off syrup twice a week in order to fill the Collaborative's orders.

A benefit to the Collaborative's model is the increased co-promotion of local agricultural products to everyone's customer base and the opportunity to create stronger community connections when it comes to retailing local food.

Another collaborative opportunity for producers to consider is connecting with a local "U-Pick" orchard. Since many people turn to seasonal outdoor activities, such as apple-picking, as a form of entertainment on the week-

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ends, Brown found selling syrup to a local orchard was a great way to reach the orchard's market, gain new customers, and sell syrup during the off-season. When it comes to agritourism, more collaboration across agricultural sectors may provide more opportunity to expand markets and increase syrup sales.

## Markets Going Virtual

Another sales avenue lost has been the craft markets, farmers' markets, and in-person holiday shows where producers rent a table and sell products. These opportunities allow for customer interaction, sampling of product, and opportunities for customers to socialize and promote favorite items with their fellow shoppers. Although farmers markets were deemed essential at the start of the pandemic because they allow for food access, the lack of social-

ization coupled with necessary safety restrictions resulted in a decrease in sales from previous years.

Many towns and organizations have found alternatives to these in-person shows by offering them online as virtual marketplaces. Craftspeople and agricultural producers can advertise their products on the show's website, which is open to customers for browsing and shopping online. This is another opportunity where having attractive photographs of product and a diversity of value-added product for the holiday season is important.

## Off-Season Opportunities

The loss of maple weekends in March motivated sugarmakers to come up with new maple agritourism ventures and look to a different time of year: the fall. New York, Maine, and

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**N**AMSC has launched [mapleresearch.org](http://mapleresearch.org), a new online resource for the maple industry. The site is a curated collection of research papers, articles, videos, and tools, representing the most current and scientifically accurate information for maple production, to help all producers make the best products possible using the most current and most sustainable practices.

From *Maple Syrup Digest* articles, to producers' manuals, to how-to vid-

eos, the site includes a collection of the best resources available online about all aspects of maple syrup production, at no cost. The site is searchable, and resources can be downloaded and printed.

The site was built in collaboration with the University of Vermont's Proctor Maple Research Center, and funding was provided by the U.S.



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several other states hosted fall maple weekends as a way to make up for sales lost in the spring. Lyle Merle explained New York's most recent Fall Maple Tour received over 500 visitors during the tour's two weekends. It's a great time of year to plan an outdoor festival – not too cold and set against the backdrop of fall foliage. Some producers experienced a rise in fall sales thanks to these events.

A fall maple festival can also be a great addition to maple's agritourism experiences. Merle described New York's Fall Maple Tour as having many different offerings available to the public including sugarhouse tours, bottling and candy making demonstrations, chainsaw carving demonstrations, pumpkins for sale, and more. A fall festival can be a collaborative event, with a group of producers working together, along with their state's maple produc-

er's association, to promote the event's activities and schedule.

Highland County, Virginia has launched the Virginia Maple Syrup Trail (<https://viriniapmaplesyrup.com>). This concept is well worth exploring for other states. Customers are given a passport that can be stamped throughout the year, excluding busy times such as Maple Festival and March weekends, at eight different sugarhouses that comprise the trail. Once all eight stamps are collected, visitors receive a free gift. The website for this trail is interactive, clear, and promotes a wonderful agritourism opportunity throughout the year.

While sugarhouses visits may be limited again in 2021, producers can still connect with customers near and far through virtual tours of the sugarhouse. With people still confined to their homes, having scheduled live video tours can be an opportunity to

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help replace in-person tours and also as a way of for advertising to a larger consumer base online. Creating a YouTube channel that can be linked to from your website with videos highlighted on your social media channels can further help promote the maple community.

"This is really a lasting change," says Lamontagne. "Whether COVID prompts it or not, you have to be constantly looking new ways of distributing and marketing your product because times are changing. Everything is happening online now." Given the un-

predictable landscape for the foreseeable future, now is a great time to get sales online, invest time in developing social media accounts, review branding, and think about collaborative opportunities to help spread maple's sweetness.



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