Indian Brook Farm

Introduction

Craig and Wendi Niebruegge started selling beef direct to consumers from Indian Brook Farm near Blountville in Sullivan County, Tennessee in 2005, upon moving from South Carolina. The farm has been in Wendi’s family since 1909. After developing a local market for their beef, produce and eggs at the local farmers market, they now sell all products direct from the farm and by delivery to consumers.

The Niebruegges sold meat from seven cattle direct to consumers in the greater Kingsport area in 2013, all from calves produced on their farm. With increased demand for their meat, they are growing their cow herd. They currently have 26 cows, which are often run with Wendi’s dad’s herd.

Connecting to the Customer

The Niebruegges believe that helping their customers feel a connection to the farm where food is being produced has been essential to their business growth. “Our customers feel like they have connected with the farmer, so they know the product,” said Wendi. Craig said that it is Wendi who fosters that connection. “Wendi provides an indirect service to our customers,” he said. “She talks to them and delivers the farm message and news.”
The most effective tool to deliver that message, through 2013, has been direct email. “We have a 190-person email list, so I might send out an email saying, ‘I’m picking green beans today and I have greens available...and don’t forget, I have beef in the freezer,” said Wendi. “It never fails that you send out an email and you get responses.”

As the farm’s customer base grows, Wendi expects that Facebook – and perhaps other social media tools – will become a bigger part of maintaining that farm-to-customer connection. “Customers like the story. They like what we’re doing; they have a relationship with us,” she said. “They like the fact that they can ask me about what I did out on the farm today, and they can look at pictures on my Facebook page.” Wendi also noted how easy it is for Facebook to reach people who may not be current customers, as the farm’s Facebook friends comment on and “Like” her posts. “If their [her Facebook friends’] settings allow, all their Facebook friends will see those comments,” she said. This generates a word-of-mouth effect.

Whether using email, social media or the person-to-person interaction that Wendi said is most important, honesty and transparency are essential for maintaining that farm-to-customer connection. “We are always honest with the customer – whatever they ask,” she said.

Focus on Consumer Wants

The Niebruegges have seen their customers demand their beef for two reasons: quality and production practices. Craig, who did not grow up on a farm, realized the farm-raised beef had potential when he tasted the meat on visits to Wendi’s family. He said one day, “This is the best beef I’ve ever eaten.”

When they moved to Blountville, Wendi said she wanted to feed their children beef produced without antibiotics. As they grew their farm marketing and small cattle herd, they discovered plenty of friends and acquaintances interested in the same kind of beef. “People at church started asking us about it, then it spread to other people in the community,” said Wendi.

Their products do tend to attract customers with relatively higher incomes – professionals between 30 and 50 years old who want a
relationship with the farm and value the production practices used by the Niebruegges. The Niebruegges follow USDA Agricultural Marketing Service guidelines for naturally raised beef, producing beef without using antibiotics or adding growth hormones and steroids. Other farm products are produced using organic practices and methods, but are not certified organic. Wendi said they are very clear in explaining why they are not certified organic to customers. “We believe this honest relationship keeps them from needing a lot of labels and endorsements,” she said.

Pricing
Whether selling at farmers market or from the farm, pricing beef has always been a challenge, admitted Wendi. “Hands down, pricing is the hardest thing to do,” she said. While her beef has characteristics not available in beef at the local grocery store, she realizes the price point cannot shock her customers. “I have to at least see what the grocery store prices are,” she said. She compares prices at her local grocery store with prices at a high-end grocery or health food store in Kingsport to give herself a price range. “Then I ask myself how much are my customers willing to pay?” She also uses herself as the final “gut check” for pricing. “I ask myself, ‘Would I be willing to pay

Looking Ahead
The Niebruegges filled three orders for bulk meat sales of half a beef each in 2013, the first meat they have not sold by the individual cut. Larger orders will probably result in a small change in their business practices. “People buying halves wanted to use PayPal,” said Wendi. “We’ll probably move to that for larger transactions.” They currently only accept cash and check for payment.

As they increase their production capacity, they see potential in selling to a small-volume wholesale market, perhaps a local restaurant.

“We asked ourselves, ‘How can we keep this farm a farm? How can we make it sustainable for the next generation?’” said Wendi. “We are just very blessed that we have been able to do that so far.”
For now, the Niebruegges continue to serve their customers mainly with sales from their home, keeping to their dream of making a living from the family farm. “We asked ourselves, ‘How can we keep this farm a farm? How can we make it sustainable for the next generation?’” said Wendi. “We are just very blessed that we have been able to do that so far.”

Learn more about the Tennessee Value-Added Beef Program and the Center for Profitable Agriculture online at https://ag.tennessee.edu/cpa or by calling (931) 486-2777.