

The Role and Importance of Regional and National Trade Associations in Marketing Specialty Forest Products¹

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ABSTRACT: Many special forest product entrepreneurs often state that the early and continuing success of their businesses depend heavily on their access to marketing association networks, their members and associates. These networks are invaluable in providing access to business contacts, clients and customers, and provide channels for direct or wholesale marketing of their products.

Direct marketing from the producer to the consumer is one of the best ways to increase the value of products sold at the farm. Charlie will speak to the emerging importance of trade and marketing associations, and will specifically focus on the North American Farmer's Direct Marketing Association and its actual and potential role in assisting producers in marketing specialty forest products.

Growing up on a sixty-two acre poultry farm in Western Massachusetts, I had always wondered if there were any value to all of those plants, trees, and other things that grow out in the woods behind the chicken coops. Now, as I continue to manage that farm, no longer abundant with poultry, I have begun to seek out alternative ways to financially sustain the land as well as the adjacent woods.

I had often thought that it would be nice if there were some sort of trade organization, a targeted group of my peers with similar interests who could help me to realize new ways to create an income from that land. I do not want to disturb the natural setting of the landscape and am not looking to get rich. I would only like to be able to make a reasonable living off of the land, with the woods providing product diversity to supplement my overall farm marketing business. I want to be able to provide for my family and enjoy a reasonable quality of life. This is my personal/business mission statement.

As farm marketers in today's society, we require specialized support systems. Trade and marketing associations offer new alternatives to supplement our often individualistic, entrepreneurial styles—support systems. Trade organizations generally offer a menu of tangible and intangible benefits. Members are free to utilize none, one, or all of these, based on their interests and needs. For most of us, those needs are constantly shifting. This creates the ever evolving ways and means by which members utilize these organizations from year to year.

If a trade organization is to be of benefit to you in the marketing of specialty forest products, you will need to recognize what your needs are from those of the rest of the group's members. Take some time to sit with family members and business associates. Discuss your particular strengths. What type of support do you need? What do you most enjoy—is it being on the forest floor among the trees with no other humans for miles around, or do you get the most out of making a sale, face to face with a customer who appreciates the fruits of your labor? Write a personal/business mission statement to provide focus to your needs. Frame it. Hang it in your bedroom. It is not to be seen by your customers, but to help you to recognize why you are doing what you are doing with your life. It will allow you to more easily pursue the specialized support systems that you need.

One significant advantage to working with a trade association is that you can translate your particular needs to the association. A well run trade group will respond so that the needs of their members get fulfilled. Active members often shape the development of an industry.

Generally, trade organizations play a major role in defining an industry and nurturing business development. Agroforestry is still being defined in terms of commerce and socioeconomics. Academia helps to define it, but somehow their theories need a stamp of approval from the producers, from "the real world", if you will.

The challenge to an association administrator, like

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myself, is being able to balance the needs of all members equally in order to truly service the entire industry, not just the individual members. When the proper balance is struck, a trade organization becomes a powerful vehicle to provide a win-win situation for all of the parties involved.

Therefore, the importance of trade organizations is first and foremost that they exist and are available to assist in meeting the needs of industry and individuals. All of the intangible benefits that accompany their existence compile the single most valuable benefit to their members and to the industry. Communications on a local, regional, or even global scope prompt further discussions among members. Over a period of time, this stimulant creates industry standards, growth, and outreach. Individual members benefit from the forum created by the fellowship of like-minded thinkers. It creates a valuable exchange of ideas that would not be likely to occur otherwise. Lobbying is often the result of this type of evolution of trade associations. Even a small trade association lends credibility to an industry when its mission is well founded and its performance is organized.

The role of a well managed trade organization is to maintain an awareness of the pulse of the industry, to bridge the microcosms of marketers, producers, academics, and government officials. They coordinate industry activity while allowing room for businesses to maintain their individuality. They also manage the cooperative assignment of needed services such as market studies, public outreach publications, and other activities that foster industry growth.

The strength and performance of an organization is entirely dependant on the communication of its membership. One organization that is quickly establishing itself as a premier trade association that services rural entrepreneurs is the North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Association. This group is

supported by a membership that is enthusiastic about marketing the "wholesome family experience" of rural and agricultural life. It is driven by a board of directors elected from and by the membership who are deeply committed to promoting the success of farm direct marketing.

Many NAFDMA members are already engaged in some form of agroforestry. The sales of Christmas trees, wreaths, herbs, food products from the forest floor, and tickets for hayrides through "enchanted forests" make up significant portions of income on these diverse, land-based businesses NAFDMA members include operators of farm stands, pick-your-own farms, consumer supported agriculture, farmers' markets, entertainment and theme farms, and government and allied industries. The business activities of the members range from growing and selling apples to giving safari ranch tours including zebras. But, the majority of the primary members are farm families simply looking to eke out a living on their valued small farms.

Beginning, as well as veteran agroforesters and allied services can help themselves and their businesses significantly by working with local trade organizations. They should also consider joining the North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Association for a fellowship experience that comes highly recommended by rural enterprise operators throughout North America. NAFDMA provides publications that focus on the sales of many products including niche markets for mushrooms, small plants, nuts, herbs, and ornamental plants. The group also sponsors a major conference each year. The program includes over 30 sessions on direct marketing. The trade show features over 80 exhibitors, and the bus tours feature over a dozen roadside stand and farm market stops. All of these amenities are equally suitable for agroforest farmers, as they are agricultural farmers for the marketing of specialty forest products.