



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRADERS AT THE MILK MARKET

Adapted by the Limerick Market Trustees from the guidelines of an Bord Bia – the Irish Food Board

OVERVIEW

In recent years, we have seen tremendous growth in the number of farmers' markets and other direct local-produce supply schemes in Ireland. These have been driven, to a large degree, by a yearning for provenance and authenticity in the food chain. The idea of being able to source food locally and directly from the producer is, for many, a refreshing and satisfying way to shop, as well as a way of directly supporting the local economy and supply base.

As well as being the source of a wide variety of foodstuffs, horticultural and craft products, Limerick Milk Market is also valued for its social dimension, giving people in the locality a chance to meet and interact with each other. Many find this informal atmosphere more community orientated than the more structured environment of high street retailing. The Milk Market also has a role to play in food tourism, with food trails now becoming more commonplace around Ireland.

From the perspective of the small food producer, the Milk Market offers a number of advantages as a route to market. The supply chain is shorter and there is a more informal approach to marketing.

This shorter supply chain also allows the producer to remain in direct control of the product. As the producer has, for the most part, direct links to the customer, instant feedback is available. This assists in developing market research and in

allowing the food producer to make informed decisions on future product development and range enhancement.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR PRODUCT

Uniqueness: Food companies spend a great deal of time determining the unique selling proposition (USP) of their products. You will need to do the same. Establishing what differentiates your product from the competition is critical to its success in the marketplace. 'Uniqueness' is a multi-dimensional quality and a balancing act is required between highlighting the strongest points of difference of your product and communicating its overall attractiveness. A product can be unique for several reasons:

Taste: Does your product taste better than other similar, competing products?

Authenticity of ingredients: Do you use vanilla pods rather than vanilla essence, for example?

Production method: Are your products dry aged, handcrafted, etc.?

Provenance: Is there a special story relating to who makes the product or the area it is made in?

Health benefits: Are there health benefits to your products which scientific research can support in keeping with current legislation?

Freshness: Are your vegetables harvested and sold within, say, 12 hours? This is an important consideration for many customers.

Rare variety: Do you sell an unusual variety of a fruit or vegetable?

Price: You need to ensure that the price you charge is fair and competitive within the marketplace.

Locality: Are you highlighting your proximity to the market, especially if you are based within a 40-100km (20-60 mile) radius?

Organic status: Fertilizer and pesticide-free foods, and good animal welfare credentials are a priority for many customers. Remember that you must have the necessary accreditation from the relevant certifying body.

To reiterate: one USP may be enough to make your product stand out from competitors initially; however, it is in the product's overall quality, and not on any individual point, that sales growth will be based. A brown soda bread which has organic status as its USP may attract initial attention but may find it difficult to sustain long term sales, if it doesn't deliver an excellent taste also.

Quality and freshness: Quality is paramount in the delivery of all goods and services and the farmers' market environment is no different. You must ensure that you have created a production system that delivers consistently good product. Irrespective of what you are selling, freshness is key, as long-term success in the marketplace ultimately depends on this.

One bad experience may mean a customer never returns again and poor word of mouth can have even more severe implications. You need to be rigorous with your standards. A policy whereby you and your staff try out a sample from each batch produced is a simple and reliable foundation for a quality control strategy. This could also act as a taste education tool for staff becoming familiar with the product.

Shelf life: If you have a product that has a short shelf life, you need to be acutely aware of the rotation process so that you can keep product moving and avoid the problem of stock going out of date. There are some simple ways which can help extend the shelf life of your product, e.g. if you are selling organic meat, it may make more sense to sell it frozen rather than fresh. Alternatively, you may be able to vacuum pack some products so that the shelf life is lengthened. It is essential that you verify the use-by date on your product by running the relevant shelf life trials. For further information please refer to FSAI Guidance Note 18 'Determination of Product Shelf-Life' (http://www.fsai.ie/publications/guidance_notes/gn18.pdf).

Packaging: The role of good packaging is threefold: it should protect the integrity of the product; it should make access to it easy and safe; and it should do justice to the foodstuff aesthetically. Ensure that your packaging authenticates the quality of the product within and that it is appropriate for a market environment. Take time to look at all the packaging types that are available in the marketplace, ensuring that you choose the correct one.

Labelling: Closely tied to the issue of packaging is labelling. The Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) (http://www.fsai.ie/publications/leaflets/labelling2005_leaflet.pdf) will provide the necessary labelling guidelines for your product. In the Republic of Ireland, food labelling legislation is enforced by the local Environmental Health Officers (EHOs). The label on your product must

contain your name and address and be illustrated in a clear and precise fashion, so as to enable a customer to contact you where necessary. All information provided must be easy to understand, clearly legible, as well as indelible and not obscured in any way by price labels or sealing tapes.

Other practical considerations to take into account include the fact that your product could be exposed to moisture and subject to low or high temperatures, depending on the weather. This is important, especially if you handwrite your label, which must be done with indelible ink.

Claims regarding organic status must be restricted to produce/products that are produced within the certification system and labelled fully in compliance with the requirements of the organic certification bodies.

As a general requirement, organic licenses/certificates must be prominently displayed. Where all produce/products on the stand are not organic, it must be completely obvious to the customer which products are organic and which are not.

FOOD SAFETY

Hygiene: With regard to the Republic of Ireland, a comprehensive list of food legislation is available on the Food Safety Authority of Ireland's (FSAI) website <http://www.fsai.ie/legislation/food/index.asp> and the requirements for starting a food business are outlined in the business start-up section at http://www.fsai.ie/industry/starting/industry_starting.asp.

Guidance Note 16 'food stalls' as issued by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (http://www.fsai.ie/publications/guidance_notes/gn16.pdf) will assist you with regard to the standards and arrangements necessary for all food stalls, in compliance with current legislation. The scope of this document includes current food hygiene legislation; HACCP principles; training of staff; relevant documentation; labelling requirements; preparation of food off-site; transportation of food; and personal hygiene; as well as the general requirements of food stalls including what constitutes low and high risk activities.

You must also register with your local Health Service Executive (HSE) Office.

There, your Environmental Health Officer (EHO) will advise you about specific requirements pertaining to the manufacturing and selling of your type of food

product. Contact details for the Health Service Executive Offices are available in Annex 2 of Guidance Note 16 or you can contact the FSAI advice line on 1890 336677 for the contact details of your local office. In addition to registering, if you make or handle products of animal origin you may also require approval for this. Please consult the food law section at http://www.fsai.ie/legislation/eu_hygiene_regs/index.asp for further information.

FINANCIAL MATTERS/INSURANCE

Price: Your pricing needs to be competitive and you must ensure that all costs are included in your selling price. Failure to work out your price accurately could result in an operating loss that will immediately undermine your business model. One mistake often made by producers at the beginning is to benchmark their price according to a competitor and ignore their own costs. When they realise they are losing money, they may have to dramatically increase the selling price, causing confusion and dissatisfaction amongst customers. The sample pricing model set out in Appendix 1 is designed to help you calculate a fair and reasonable selling price for your product.

Bear in mind that price is a selling point as much as any other aspect of your product. Please ensure that you display an individual price sign on each product.

Tax/Value Added Tax (VAT): You will need to discuss the implications of tax and VAT with your financial adviser who will set out the necessary guidelines for you.

Insurance: Insurance cover for product liability, public liability and employers' liability is now a minimum requirement for all markets. However, the level of cover required can vary significantly, depending on the type of food you are selling.

THE PRODUCT

Product display: It is important to ensure that your stall looks good at all times, is properly merchandised and is visually appealing. If you know someone with a flair for layout why not invite them to give you some advice on presentation? A few simple choices can make all the difference in how a prospective customer views your stall. Keep the stall well stocked and use contrasting colours to

achieve a vibrant presence. In addition, a blackboard and chalk is useful to tell customers about the product as well as ingredients and manufacturing processes used, e.g. “handmade using organic milk”. The more information, i.e., ingredients, cooking instructions, etc., that can be provided to the customer, the greater your chance of making a sale. Remember, a potential customer is not just the person you are dealing with directly. Everyone who passes will give your stall and range of product some consideration. It is important that they see the very best of your offering at all times.

Tasting: It is important to allow as many customers as possible taste your product. It provides an opportunity for customers to stop at your stall without feeling under pressure to buy. This gives you a chance to engage in conversation with them and explain the uniqueness of your product.

However, in a busy market situation, an open tasting opportunity may become no more than a feeding station for passers by, yielding little sales in return. You will need to manage this if it becomes an issue. One possibility is to allow individual customers taste product once you have engaged them in conversation.

THE STALL

Company or product name: To help customers recognise your stall, it is important that you have a clearly marked brand or sign. Many stallholders have invested in some simple signage with the name of their business on it, as well as an illustration of the production process used. Your contact details should also be clearly visible. If you have organic accreditation, organic licences/certificates must be prominently displayed.

Leaflet: An explanatory leaflet describing your company, the product and its USPs is also highly recommended. Recipes are indispensable and you should include one or two on your leaflet.

Temperature control: The stall must be provided with the necessary equipment to ensure that relevant food products are kept at the correct temperatures. Chilled foods must be maintained at between minus 1° and plus 5° Celsius. You need to find a suitable way of transporting the food to the market so that it is protected and that the temperature is maintained at or below 5° Celsius. Frozen food must be transported and stored at a temperature at or below minus 18° Celsius. A temperature probe should be available to check the temperature. For further information, please consult Guidance Note 16 ‘food stalls’ as published by

the Food Safety Authority of Ireland
(http://www.fsai.ie/publications/guidance_notes/gn16.pdf).

Stall hygiene: It is important to note that food safety requirements vary depending on your product category and clarification should be sought from the Environmental Health Department or the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (http://www.fsai.ie/publications/guidance_notes/gn16.pdf) with regard to this. For example, depending on the food safety requirement of your product, you may be required to have hot and cold running water.

It is of the utmost importance that you keep your stall clean and fresh throughout the day. It will be necessary to have a supply of food-grade detergents, kitchen roll/paper, etc. constantly on hand.

Waste disposal plan: Ensure that you have an adequate waste disposal plan in place. You may need to take responsibility for your own waste or come to an arrangement with the market manager. It is also important to segregate your rubbish for the purposes of recycling.

Electricity: If you are using a refrigerated unit, you will need you will need to make arrangements in advance with the market manager with regard to electricity supply. You may need an extension lead so it is important that you check the electricity source. A 16 amp outdoor socket is the most commonly used.

STAFF

Dress code: The clothing worn by stallholders varies from person to person and the most important rule is that whatever you are wearing, it must be compatible with the product you are selling. It is recommended that you wear some sort of protective clothing, like an apron and gloves to instil customer confidence that the product is being handled hygienically.

For further information, please consult Guidance Note 16 'food stalls' as published by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (http://www.fsai.ie/publications/guidance_notes/gn16.pdf).

The weather will vary enormously when selling through the market, so having the correct clothing to protect you is vital. Sleeveless jackets, hats, etc. should all be

part of your winter fashion wardrobe at the market. It is important to dress appropriately and comfortably.

THE CUSTOMER

Customer service: The importance of a pleasant manner and in providing as much information as possible about your product cannot be overstressed. You need to engage with as many customers as you possibly can. Some of the following tips may help with this:

- Give the customer a sample to taste and details of the ingredients
- Provide information about your company and the production process involved
- Suggest some recipe ideas/usage occasions
- Recommend a product from another market stall that will complement yours
- Provide some useful storage instructions

Market day checklist: A comprehensive checklist is a sensible organisational technique to ensure nothing vital is left behind, particularly where long distances need to be covered. A checklist should include the following:

The product

- Product for sale
- Product samples

The stall

- Banner or large sign
- Product/price signage
- Leaflets
- Knives/chopping boards, etc.
- Taste plates

- Napkins
- Cocktail sticks
- Weighing scales
- Cash float
- Calculator
- Carrier bags

Food safety

- Apron, gloves, hair nets, etc.
- Refrigeration/freezer units
- Extension lead
- Temperature probe/record sheet
- Cloths
- Food-grade detergents
- Soap/towel
- Dust pan and brush
- Suitable containers for waste
- Relevant health/safety/organic approval and certificates where necessary

KEY TIPS

- ✓ Consult your local Environmental Health Officer with regard to relevant food safety requirements
- ✓ Have a clearly marked brand or sign, so that customers will recognise your stall
- ✓ Make sure that you have the necessary equipment so that food products are kept at the correct temperatures
- ✓ It is important that your stall is properly merchandised
- ✓ It is a good idea to allow customers taste your product
- ✓ Make excellent customer service your goal
- ✓ Consult your 'Market Day Checklist'