

**Developing Consumer Advocates through Proactive Word-of-Mouth
Marketing Techniques thereby Creating New Market and Distribution
Models for Local Foods**

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This project would not have been possible had it not been for the multitude of people who have dedicated themselves to help the farming community.



The vision for this project was first expressed by Tessa Burpee, past Executive Director of the Heart of Maine RC&D, and her former colleague, the late Vaughn Rasar, of USDA-NRCS. Their commitment to improving the lives of Maine's people, especially Maine's farmers, shaped their ability to dream big, work harder than most, and "make stuff happen." Tessa and Vaughn both came from a farm background, and understand the struggle to market good food and meet consumer demand. **Thank you Vaughn and Tessa.**

When this project started in 2007 only a few in other states were contemplating online ordering. Tessa immediately picked up on the possibilities, and, with the forward thinking of another non-profit, Western Mountains Alliance, a workshop and direction for this vision was born.

Another thanks to **Greg Franklin**, of GSFA Consulting, the marketing guru who taught us the term "aggregating the consumer" and the method of "telling your story". He knows what he is talking about, having grown up on a farm and currently helping his brother during the apple season park cars for the family apple farm in New Hampshire.

When it comes to supporting Food Buying Clubs, another visionary was the late **Jim Cook** of the Crown of Maine Organic Cooperative. Jim saw the possibilities of aggregating consumers at regional distribution locations. He based his idea on the 1970's food co-op model. Now, two generations of folks understand this idea -- the 1970's natural foods advocates and the 20 to 30 year olds, who want a closer connection to their local farmer and healthy food alternatives. Being one of the 1970 natural food advocates himself, Jim started distributing to newly formed buying groups in Portland and DownEast before this project took shape. Jim's daughter, Marada has continued his work. Thank you Jim and Marada.



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Two other entrepreneurs made the software system work. **Jeremy Bloom** of Buying ClubSoftware.com, whose system came online last year, and Sky Mayhew, who continues to work out the bugs and adapt the ordering and tracking system on his system. It is not easy work to figure out how to do “split” orders, but they both did and now the BuyingClubSoftware system works well and Sky’s system is in beta test.

Finally, I want to thank the individuals and families of the Maranacook Local Foods Buying Club who understand that joining together to purchase food from local farmers is good. Ultimately, I dedicate this project to the 18 or so farmers who understand how to tell their story, spread the word, and go after a good market when they see one!

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Summary

The Consumer Buying Club -Word of Mouth Marketing project focused on ways to improve the income of farmers from development of consumer advocates who would then champion the farmer's cause by word-of-mouth marketing. These champions would then form local food buying clubs and work with the farmer to sell the farmer's products to the members of the buying club.

The project was able to define the consumer profile of those that would support local farmers. These consumers were young mothers with children or baby boomers interested in local fresh healthy food and supporting local farmers. We were able to find advocates from each group who were willing to develop a buying club. In addition, the club tested new online ordering software which made ordering easy for the members. They could go online anytime within the week to order, and then pick up the order later in the week.

Success of the Word-of-Mouth marketing method was demonstrated within 6 months by the fact that over 50 families started participating in the Local Foods Buying Club. These families spent over \$1,500 in local food purchases every two weeks from 17 local farmers.

Farmers liked the buying club method of selling their product as they would know how much of each product was needed each week, and have one drop off point to deliver to. Farmers also liked the idea that the club would manage the ordering system.

One of the other positive outcomes of the project was the fact that a local school was willing to host the Local Foods Buying Club, giving them storage space and a place to receive deliveries and breakdown product into orders. This arrangement worked well for the school as students could volunteer time to assist as part of their community service requirement. Teachers could use the club activities as a way to teach students about agriculture, food and nutrition.

To prove sustainability of the concept, the Local Foods Buying Club needed to develop a formal organizational structure and be able to pay for overhead and operating expenses. Club members formed an organization affiliated with a non-profit as a fiscal agent. Members and farmers were charged annual fees for participation to cover overhead costs. Members who were not able to pay a fee could substitute volunteering to offset the fee.

The project may have a future as there are many school districts in Maine that are supporting Farm to School activities which could benefit from a local food buying club. Many small farmers may also benefit by having a local market for their products.

All the research results and supporting materials, including a draft operations manual are available at our *Farm Fresh For ME* website, www.fffme.com.

The Goal of This Project

The goal we intended to reach was to use Word-of-Mouth marketing strategies to aggregate consumers, and at the same time:

- 1) Help farmers expand their customer base and increase sales; and
- 2) Establish a model local foods buying club that allows farmers to reduce their marketing, labor, and transportation/distribution costs while making fresh, nutritious food more available and affordable to the consumer.

Background and Justification

The Market Barrier to Buy Local from the Consumer Perspective

More and more consumers are expressing an interest in buying local foods. Maine people, in general, support Maine farmers for a variety of reasons. They want to know where their food is coming from, to keep farms viable, to enjoy green fields & open space, and to maintain rural community values¹. Consumers want to have stronger connections with local farmers. A greater awareness of the importance of childhood nutrition is also driving more young mothers to seek higher quality foods at prices they can afford. Seniors are looking for fresher, local foods that taste good and bring back memories of their youth. Both groups are willing to pay slightly higher prices, for quality, convenience and easy access.

However, significant barriers exist to buying local. Consumers typically cite CONVENIENCE, ACCESS and PRICE as the key reasons they shop at grocery stores according to the recent Agricultural Creative Economy² report. Five market studies on consumer purchasing patterns from direct market farmers have been done: in Maine^{3,4}, New Hampshire⁵, Connecticut⁶, Nebraska and Oregon⁷. In the Maine study, high prices and quality were the top two reasons for not purchasing local produce.

In both the Maine and Nebraska studies, consumers were asked what would influence them to purchase more local products, and they highlighted availability, price and convenience as the major factors. In the Maine and New Hampshire studies, consumers said they would only travel between 5 to 10 miles for local produce. In New Hampshire, consumers said they would only travel up to 5 miles to a farmers' type market, and convenience of location was paramount to stopping and shopping there. Consumers do not want to travel to multiple outlets to find all the local foods they want. In these market studies, consumers also stated they did not know where to access the local farmers in their area. Consumers search for local information about farms which includes Word-of-Mouth, roadside signs, and newspapers. However, many farmers are outside the normal travel routes, or are in rural areas away from consumer service centers.

The Market Challenge - Getting More Consumers to Purchase Local Foods While Minimizing Marketing Costs From the Farmer Perspective

Farmers are struggling to find ways to market directly to consumers and make more money selling retail. Farmers turned to direct marketing to get away from selling wholesale and the low commodity prices in that market. Wholesaling small quantities do not cover costs. If a farmer moves to direct marketing he can receive higher prices which hopefully create higher profits.

In the past 5 years, Maine has seen a 250% increase in the agricultural sales that are direct to consumers. At present, over 800 farms, (10% of Maine's farms) sell direct to consumers. A University of Maine study surveyed 400 of these farms and found they generate about \$20 million in sales. The Department estimates that this sector generates about \$75 million per year in direct-to-consumer sales.

While direct marketing is increasing in Maine and the Northeast, from the farmer perspective, each of these marketing methods has drawbacks. The drawbacks include the time necessary for farmers to do the market outreach and advertising and the cost in time and labor to get to and from the markets. Farmers are finding that the travel, marketing and advertising costs associated with direct marketing can cut heavily into their profits.

Farmers who develop farmstands must conveniently locate them on a main road to get enough customer traffic. Costs for establishing direct market outlets in high real estate areas can be prohibitive for most small farmers. For farmers who do farmer's markets, this method may be more convenient for the consumer, but is a heavy labor and travel burden on the farmer. CSA marketing is a lower cost for the farmer, in that a core group of consumers can be developed at the beginning of the season, bringing in needed funds. However, farmers have to devote long hours to customer development and relations. CSA farmers are also limited to a local customer base, as many consumers do not want to travel far to a farm to pick up a weekly vegetable supply.

Direct market farmers are also constantly challenged to get more local consumers to frequent their farmstands, PYO operations, and farmers markets. Farmers are utilizing print and signage and special farm events to attract consumers to direct market outlets. They have even started CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) subscription-based farming to encourage local people to purchase direct from the farm and to provide more convenient distribution.

Some new alternative marketing methods are starting to meet consumer needs for convenience and assist the farmer. Perhaps the most profitable are CSA's where the farmer delivers to a central "hub" closer to the consumer. Some farmers have developed on-line ordering with strategically located drop-off sites in the nearby cities. Some farmers are doing home delivery on limited routes. Again, most of the burden for distribution and market development is still being borne by the farmers.

The Market Opportunity – Capitalizing on Word-of-Mouth Marketing (WOM) to Create New Consumer Demand

Word-of-Mouth creates consumer advocates

Consumer marketing surveys show that passive Word-of-Mouth promotion is the primary way consumers hear about when and where to purchase local produce. At a recent marketing workshop, farmers found that consumers look at the local weekly advertiser for coupons and then spread news of the farm products from one person to another and from families to families. In all three Maine market studies passive Word-of-Mouth was the most used method for consumers to find farms, farmers markets and CSA's. Even the current move to on-line ordering depends on passive Word-of-Mouth for consumers to know what farm has quality products and fair prices.

Using methods to encourage *proactive* Word-of-Mouth advertising is a new area of interest to the business world. A national Word-of-Mouth Marketing Association has formed over this marketing method and many large companies are now focusing on developing WOM and consumer advocates to push their brands.

As an example, Fiskars scissors used a process to boost their brand loyalty in the marketplace. Realizing that they needed to help their customers develop an emotional connection to their product, Fiskars worked with a South Carolina marketing firm, Brains On Fire, to identify people who were passionate about scrapbooking and who had a love for sharing what they know with others. They provided training on being an “ambassador” for their company and then turned them loose to spread goodwill on behalf of the company. As a result, stores that interacted with one of these ambassadors had three times the sales growth of others in the first quarter of 2007.

This new area of market promotion has great potential for farmers but training and experience is needed. Farmers who sell directly to the public know that WOM is important, but they typically do not know how to encourage WOM. They need help developing marketing tools and strategies that make it easier for their customers to go out and “spread the word.”

Consumer advocates create groups of potential buyers

Farmers could take better advantage of Word-of-Mouth. Once consumers are aware of the farmer, his products, and his story, they can be encouraged to form groups of folks they talk with to start buying clubs. They could be induced by reduced prices they pay for produce, and farmers developing better convenient drop-off locations. Many natural fits for developing buying clubs are where people naturally aggregate: neighborhood groups, schools, churches, granges, and town community centers as well as newer, on-line communities, and even Facebook or list serves of like minded friends.

Since consumers would organize themselves, and deal with ordering issues and collecting payment from members as a group, farmers would have a given source of market with a single point of contact and distribution. The farmer would also have minimal marketing and paperwork. Consumers could also purchase from a number of farmers or distributors, expanding the number and types of products available to them. The result could be the development of many small, community-based buying club distribution locations that could be accessed by many local farmers or food distributors (See appendix 1 for food cluster map).

Project Objectives and Strategies

Our objectives and strategies for this project were to:

1. Provide educational and networking opportunities for farmers to learn about and utilize Word-of-Mouth marketing techniques and understand consumer buying club market channels.
2. Establish consumer advocate groups and farmer partners in order to create model buying clubs.
3. Build a replicable organizational infrastructure for the buying clubs.

To assist farmers with understanding Word-of-Mouth and online ordering systems, we held workshops, presented at farmer events and talked individually with interested farmers. We showed how the buying club model had advantages over selling through roadside stands, farmer's markets and CSA's. We taught how the buying club model would lower marketing costs, create faster ordering, make for simpler payment, and create a single point market distribution location for them and distributors.

The method we employed for starting a buying club was to first conduct market research for the area we wished to set up as an aggregated site. We then developed a method to build general awareness in the community. Through our contacts with other existing buying clubs we defined a consumer profile and then entered the community to identify consumer advocates with those profiles who might be interested in leading a group.

Once the group organizers were established, we identified and contacted local farmers to see which ones might be willing to supply the aggregated market (buying club). Then we employed various Word-of-Mouth marketing (WOM) techniques to encourage local consumers to participate in the buying clubs. We also figured out what services were needed to best assist making the connection between farmers and consumers, such as with the use of on-line ordering and communication tools.

Once the club got started, we developed a formal structure for providing services to the buying club. Services included; WOM training, nutritional training, online ordering support, and infrastructure purchases support (scales, storage). We also continued to gather information on how the software would influence purchasing habits of consumers and the selling practices of the farmers. In addition, we made observations about the overall experience working with a school. By the end of the project, we worked with the club to establish a sustainable structure and function, utilizing our financial modeling tool and

technical assistance to set up the formal organization. We also conducted evaluation surveys at the end of the project.

Objective 1: Provide educational and networking opportunities for farmers to learn about and utilize Word-of-Mouth marketing techniques and understand consumer buying club market channels.

Building farmer awareness

In October, 2007 the Department and Heart of Maine RC&D held the first Word-of-Mouth Marketing (WOMM) Workshop. This workshop enlisted marketing experts in WOM, and conducted the first ever consumer focus group. The key take-away lessons mirrored the background section of this report. It was clear that consumers prefer to use and benefit from Word-of-Mouth advertising. The farmer's products and stories are what they like to talk about thus making word-of mouth a very powerful vehicle for increasing sales of locally produced food.

In the fall of 2008 the first conference was held to help farmers understand the use of the internet for online ordering. One new piece of software was highlighted at the event. It was developed in New Hampshire, called *Plymouth Local Foods* and was being used in Maine in the Farmington area. We also found that some farmers in DownEast Maine and Portland were also developing local food buying clubs. We contacted one farmer, Carly Delsignore and Aaron Bell of Tide Mill Farm in Edmunds, Maine. They had already found a few consumer advocates and were delivering to locations in three area towns. They were using a rudimentary excel spreadsheet and email system to take orders. We invited them to discuss their experiences. The take home messages from that workshop were:

- A market does exist for purchasing local products online, although the market has not been thoroughly tested.
- The online ordering software was rudimentary, and did not handle "splits" (splitting up a wholesale lot into individual orders).
- The type of consumers who would go to a farmers market may be the target customer for online ordering.
- Aggregating the market can occur by creating "drop off points" where the consumer is aggregated naturally. Farmer's markets are a potential site, but so is a consumer's house where they have formed informal buying clubs.

During the late fall (2008) and winter (2009), a series of follow-up workshops were held at the Maine Agricultural Trade Show and the New England Direct Marketing Conference. At least one workshop was held on new, online ordering methods. Over 80 farmers participated in that workshop, which featured Tide Mill Farms, Idaho Bounty and others. At that meeting we connected with Fresh Fork, out of Cleveland, Ohio, who also was using online software to aggregate supply and markets.

By the summer and fall of 2009 more farmer interest was gathering and a statewide forum was held in Portland Maine to discuss online ordering systems. There were many farmers at that

forum, and the consensus was that a statewide ordering system would not work because a statewide online market would potentially cause market disruption by open competitive pricing, and a statewide online market had no central authority controlling the market and no association/entity was recognized that could do so.

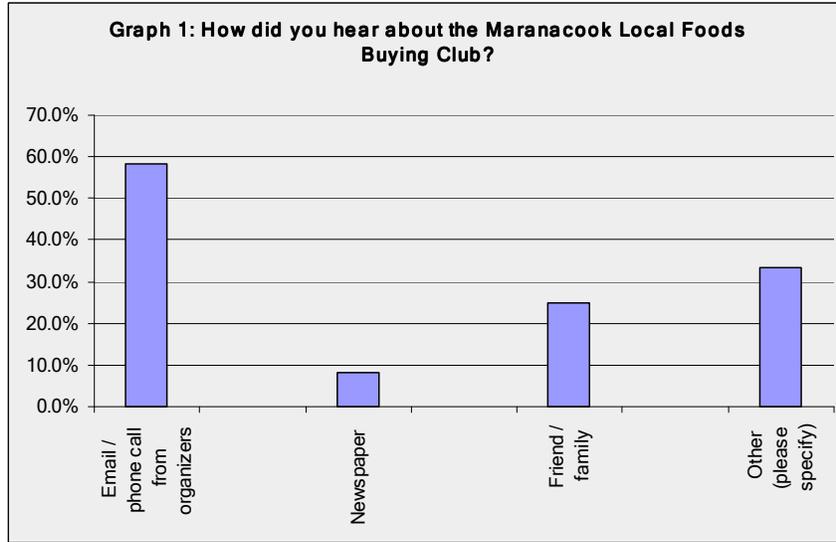
Gaining farmer interest

By the winter of 2009-2010 we set up at the Maine Agricultural Trade show and provided information on a number of systems that were getting started, including general promotional websites *GetRealGetMaine*, *Ag and Food Trader*, *Western Maine Market*, as well as our project, *Farm Fresh For ME*. Building farmer interest in developing a buying club continued into 2010. In February of 2010 we held a second farmers workshop inviting Joe Salatin of [Polyface Farm](#) in [Swoope, Virginia](#), in the [Shenandoah Valley](#) as inspirational keynote speaker. Joe's farm is featured prominently in [Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*](#) (2006) and the documentary films, [Food, Inc.](#) and [Fresh](#). He used many WOM techniques and supported the use of buying clubs to market farm products. Over 90 farms were represented at the workshop. We also gave a talk at the Statewide Farmers Market Convention in March of 2010. Over 50 farmer's market representatives came to the workshop and discussed ways to do online ordering.

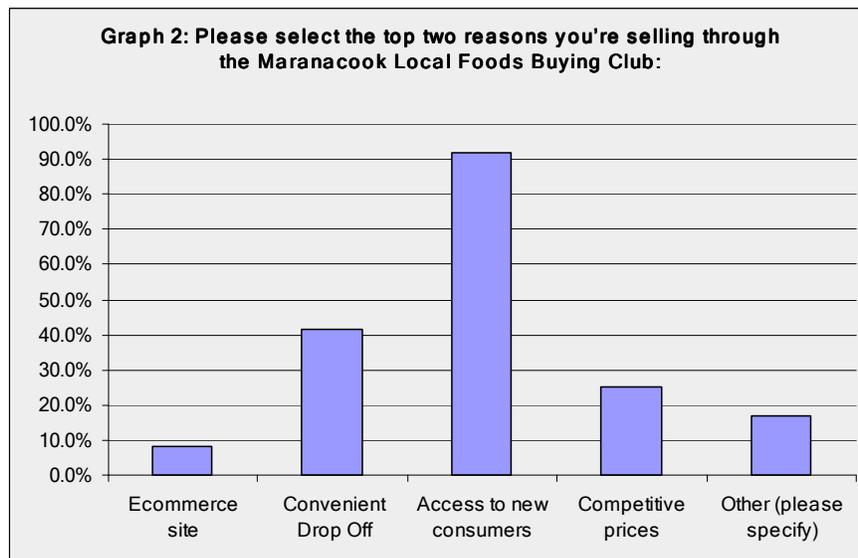
Farmers make the leap and link up with *Farm Fresh For ME*

While all these efforts were going on, the pilot project *Farm Fresh For ME* was getting off the ground. Two consumer advocates were found in the Readfield area of the Belgrade Lakes region of Maine to champion the school buying club model. Farmer's names in the area were collected from Department of Agriculture lists, and they were contacted by the two local consumer food advocates to see if they would participate in a local food buying club.

The goal of building interest and participation of farmers in the pilot had been reached by the time the Maranacook Local Foods Buying Club (MLFBC) began operations in the summer and fall of 2011. A number of the farmers who had attended these workshops were ready to work with MLFBC. Some had heard of the buying club movement, so had their interest piqued. A summary of how they found out about the club is shown in Graph 1. Of interest is that a few farmers said their customers asked them to participate in the food buying club. CONSUMERS were driving the marketing process, not the farmer.



After a few order cycles, farmers were surveyed⁸ to assess the experience with the club. 100% were very satisfied. As expected, the farmer’s reasons for wanting to continue to participate related to gaining new customer contacts and potential sales (Graph 2).



In the fall of 2011, the Department and Western Mountains Alliance held the final workshop. By this time, knowledgeable farmers in Maine were beginning to use social media as the ultimate WOM method. Online ordering systems were getting more advanced, and the conference focused on those tools. A keynote speaker, Rich Brook of *Flyte New Media*, presented information on how to use social media. Developer panels talked about their online ordering systems, and farmers shared their experiences with using the web for marketing.

The take-away messages from this workshop were that online ordering has arrived, computer-based communities using social media are the new vehicle for Word-Of-Mouth advertising, but good, old-fashion gathering of consumers to buy from local farmers still works as well.

Objective 2: Build consumer advocates around local food benefits, health and nutrition.

Market research – Building a consumer profile of a food buying club consumer advocate

The objective of this portion of the project was to find and develop consumer advocates for purchasing local food. We initially planned on selecting an area or business location in which we would conduct Word-of-Mouth marketing techniques to attract customers and then have them set up a food buying club. We thought that doing WOM campaigns by holding farmer tours, conducting cooking classes, nutrition education programs, food films, and meet your farmer events etc would assist us in exciting an individual or group.

However, we found out differently. We found out that a number of buying clubs existed in DownEast Maine whose families were already purchasing local and out of state products and health foods. We also found that a number of families from the local church, which the project manager attended, were becoming interested just by Word-of-Mouth about key terms used in the project. We decided to contact and interview a number of these buying clubs members from DownEast to ascertain why they had interest in buying local foods. We also decided to hold a focus group of the church members and close friends of the project manager to see what made them interested and what constraints they saw in purchase local fresh produce. Finally, when we decided on the Maranacook School as the pilot location, we conducted a survey of the families who were signing up to order to see if our assumptions and observations were accurate.

The Bangor focus group and DownEast buying club coordinator focus group yielded the following information about what their interests were in purchasing from local farmers. These included:

- Interest in healthier food for the family and local was perceived in that way.
- The need to support local farmers.
- Food must be convenient to order.
- Food prices must be 5-10% below retail grocery store to be worth while
- Cannot commit to running a buying club...too busy.

These individuals already had some contact with local farmers through farm visits. Some were already purchasing from local farmers. Some had the perception that locally produced food was more healthy. Some had general knowledge about supporting local through local advertising by Maine farmers.

By further evaluating the consumers in the DownEast food buying clubs we found that they fell into two clear categories of consumer:

- Young mothers with children, college educated, very sensitive to the need for healthy food alternatives for their children.
- Boomer generation women who had previously participated in Food Coops in the 1970's and 80's and wanted to revive the movement, get more local, healthy food products and support local farmers.

Once we more fully understood the consumer profile we started the search for a Food Club Coordinator for the pilot. Two individuals came forward that bridged the profile, a young mother with children in the school district, and a boomer with experience and awareness of the local food movement. Both were experienced with food buying clubs as the mother had operated a buying club in another part of the state and the boomer had been part of a buying club in another state. These characteristics were important to the success of the project.

As the Maranacook Local Foods Buying Club pilot project got underway we also conducted a survey of the members who had been attracted to the club to see if their profile matched the consumer profile. While the survey results were small the survey confirmed that we had a spread of consumers, from young to older, to families with children to empty nesters to later generation boomers. All had two major characteristics, they were educated about food, and they wanted to support local. A full summary of the survey results can be found in the attachment to this report.

A Word about place, consumer aggregation and schools as a logical site for distribution

When we first conducted market research into the types of places where people congregate, we focused in the Bangor area. We researched the following types of locations:

- Granges
- Hospitals
- Churches
- Health food stores
- Sports Gyms
- Community Centers

We found that all these locations had promise, as they were locations that would typically have folks who may be interested in good health. While these locations and businesses were identified, we eventually settled on a school system. We wanted to focus on young mothers with children as this was the demographic group which was strongest in the DownEast buying club.

We employed a college student to conduct research at a secondary school district she had previously attended. We wanted to see what interest and constraints there might be to starting a buying club at the school. She conducted informational interviews with all the key administrators of the school system, as well as teachers, students, food service and parents. The results of that research are in an attached research report⁹.

Of interest to the success of developing the buying club at the school location was the support of the school board and the superintendent. The school had a policy of supporting community sponsored events and projects. In addition the superintendent was in the customer profile of baby boomer, college educated, and with prior experience with food cooperatives in the 1970's, therefore he was very supportive. We believe not all school districts may have those qualities. More research is needed if the project is to be expanded to other school districts.

Promotion - communicating with the customer

The Word-of-Mouth message - The original objectives for this project were to see which types of Word-of-Mouth methods would attract consumers to become food advocates and join a food buying club. The assumptions were that they would need a series of workshops on nutrition and the relationship between soil health, human health and farms along with networking opportunities between the consumers and farmers. In addition we thought that cooking classes, pot luck dinners using local foods, farmer visits to consumer locations, farm visits by the consumers to the farms, along with a number of other educational tools would encourage consumers to understand and promote the food and farms and join the buying clubs.

We found that not all these methods were necessary or important. After understanding the consumer profile, written promotional materials were deemed the most effective. A typical brochure is attached to this report. The messages on the brochures were developed with the messages most heard from the focus groups, including:

- Affordable access to local food
- Fresh, healthy, nutritious food
- Easy and convenient online ordering
- Local pickup
- Enrich the local economy by supporting our farmers

This was supported by the consumer survey¹⁰ of the Maranacook Local Foods Buying Club after they got started (See Table 1).

Table 1: Please select the top two reasons you've used the Maranacook Buying Club:

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Online ordering system	21.4%	3
Convenient Pick Up	14.3%	2
Access to locally produced foods	78.6%	11
Farmers are known to you	0.0%	0
Support for area farmers	64.3%	9
Competitive prices	0.0%	0
Product freshness / quality	14.3%	2
Produce Selection	0.0%	0
Other __	0.0%	0
	<i>answered question</i>	14
	<i>skipped question</i>	0

The communication system that worked - The Food Coordinator at Maranacook School utilized the school’s newsletter network to send out flyers and articles in to parents. She also held a meeting of interested families and provided a PowerPoint presentation about the program, how it works, and the benefits. This was well received.

Of interest was that most of the parents who attended that meeting were well aware of the messages she was conveying. They had laptop computers, another sign that the younger generation of mothers was well connected and familiar with using technology.

The food coordinator also started a Facebook page. The consumer focus groups had identified Facebook as a valuable communications tool for young mothers with children along with frequent email updates using constant contact or just regular email. These very handy communication vehicles, along with the school newsletter, were very powerful ways to promote and encourage participation.

The food coordinator also developed a “meet the farmer” evening at one of the pickup times. During one month when the online ordering system was down, she coordinated a series of days for a winter farmers market. Both types of events were well received by the customers, but was not the primary motivator to join or advocate for the club.

The food coordinator also met with local town officials and the wellness committee for the school. Both groups were supportive of the messages and provided support and willingness to promote the messages to their constituencies.

Once the Maranacook Local Foods Buying Club had started selling farmer produce, Word-of-Mouth increased very quickly. The messages resonated and the quality and pricing of the products sold themselves. When the survey was done, however, it was amazing how many members found out about the club through the newspaper (See Table 2). The second highest was Word-of-Mouth!

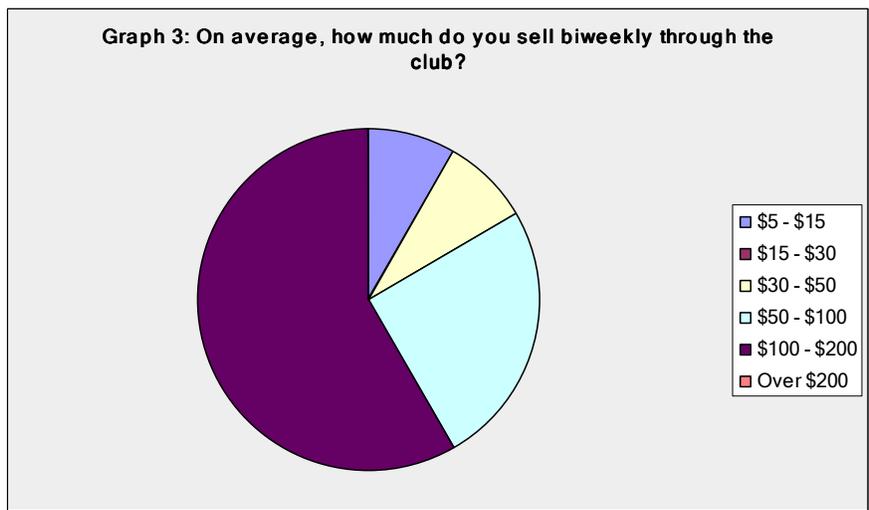
Table 2: How did you hear about the Maranacook Online Buying Club? Please check all that apply.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Email from organizers	7.7%	1
School Flyer	7.7%	1
Newspaper	61.5%	8
Facebook	7.7%	1
Friend / family	30.8%	4
School Event	0.0%	0
Other _____	15.4%	2
answered question		13
skipped question		1

The initial ordering cycle had 20 families involved but within a month 125 families were interested in the program. The power of a good product and service coupled with simple advertising in the local paper and customer-to-customer Word-of-Mouth cannot be underestimated.

The sales results – did the marketing message translate into sales to farmers

After a number of buying cycles for the Maranacook Local Foods Buying Club, a survey was taken to see how the farmers did. The results are summarized in the attached Farmer Survey report¹¹ and in the follow chart. In general farmers did very well.



Objective 3: Build organizational infrastructure for the buying club

Another objective of this project was to see if there was a way to develop an organization that consumers could look to in order to assist them in forming a buying club. This involved looking into how a buying club functions and what services they needed, and an analysis of how best to deliver those services. In addition, we looked at the buying club and how it could become financially self-sustaining.

Researching the needs

We started the process by finding websites which provided information on how to start buying clubs. Through this research we found out what problems existed in conducting buying clubs with local farmers, and how those buying clubs are finding farmers to supply them. This gave us a list of services we needed to help foster new buying clubs.

The service areas we identified and focused on were:

- Overseeing fiscal matters and capital purchases for multiple buying clubs.
- Locating farmers.
- Managing online ordering system to make purchasing convenient.
- Strategic planning for the buying club so that they could evaluate how to run and finance the club sustainably.

In the fall of the first year we contacted Local Foods Plymouth, Idaho Bounty, Philadelphia Farm to City, and MyPersonalFarmers.com owners. We interviewed and evaluated their organizational structure, their use of online ordering systems and methods of expanding into multiple market distribution areas. This process was very helpful in order to not make the same mistakes they made in their programs. Each representative from those organizations was very helpful. Each of these organizations had found limitations, mainly in:

- Dollars to support the administrative expenses
- An online ordering system that cannot easily handle multiple markets, splits, and easy reporting functions to suppliers and consumers.
- Challenges with pricing products to deal with distribution and marketing.

We researched other efforts developing around the country. LocalDirt.com and Farmsreach.com were two food aggregation and online purchasing systems being developed. FoodHub was also getting started on the west coast. Most of these systems were for matchmaking, and not for the detailed organizational structures needed at the local level.

We continued to investigate the needs of local buying clubs by holding a focus group with the DownEast Buying Clubs associated with Tide Mill Farm. They reiterated that Buying Clubs, when first started, needed capital equipment such as scales, refrigerators, freezers, packing

supplies and computers to manage bookkeeping and bookkeeping systems. They also needed on-going technical support to manage the bookkeeping and online ordering software.

It became clear that a services-oriented organization or business may have a place to assist buying club development.

Researching the Entity

Farm Fresh For ME L3C- The original vision was to establish an entity which would become an umbrella organization attached to either a non-profit organization or functioning as its own for-profit entity. The Department development philosophy is to support for-profit business development, not to increase government programs if this entity were to be sustainable.

The Department worked with the RC&D and a lawyer to get advice on what might be a good organizational structure. At the time, a new form of entity was gaining use called an L3C. These forms of business function at lower levels of profitability, and can accept grants and philanthropic owners as well. The Department and Executive Director of the RC&D decided to develop a brand for the project, and applied it to the L3C and the website, calling the initiative *Farm Fresh For ME*.

The services of the proposed entity were taking shape. The Executive Director had secured foundation funds to support capital purchases of scales, refrigeration and distribution vehicles for participating buying clubs. The business model being developed was an entity which would provide low interest loans to the clubs, or free use of equipment with the concept that once the buying club made money, or expanded beyond the size of the borrowed equipment, the equipment would be passed on to newer forming buying clubs. The entity would assist buying clubs in meeting the goal to be profitable and sustainable. A key provision would be that the buying club would have to support administrative costs of the umbrella L3C entity so that the L3C entity could also remain profitable, albeit at a low level.

A note about online ordering systems - While it was not the purpose of this grant to develop the online ordering program, we had found it necessary to have one available, as it was one of the purposes of the project to meet the convenient ordering needs expressed by the consumers we wanted to attract to a food buying club. The marketplace for online systems in 2007 was very limited.

The Heart of Maine RC&D, with Department support, worked on development of a system to use with this project. We felt the umbrella organization could manage the online system. Online ordering systems were evaluated, including Fresh Fork, Idaho Bounty, Philadelphia, Local Dirt and Harvest to Market. Each one of these systems still had flaws we hoped to overcome. Splits are one issue. A “split” is when a wholesale lot does not command enough buyers for the lot. The split (or remaining order minimum) needs to be made up by someone or else the wholesale lot is not purchased. How to handle those orders online is not easy.

Another private Maine company had developed software that handled splits but was not fully deployed by the start of this project. By the time the true pilot test for the MLFBC was nearing, the Department engaged with Western Mountains Alliance to develop another software product. It is in its beta testing mode as we end this project. However, for the purposes of this project, we eventually utilized BuyingClubSoftware.com as they came online “just in time” for the pilot test of the club.

Researching the other free market alternatives to support buying clubs

Distributor Driven Services Model

Fresh Fork was a company managing an online ordering system and distribution business. Fresh Fork was an early consultant to this project. The owner had developed a successful distribution company, playing the middleman between the farmers and the consumers, and doing it in the online world. The company was expanding to multiple distribution drop-off points, but was not necessarily developing individual buying clubs. Rather he was reaching out to individual consumers and other wholesale accounts to institutions, restaurants and health food stores. His business model had some of the elements of a full-fledged service company, but not all of those needs were able to be met for our purposes.

Crown of Maine Cooperative (COMOC) is a Maine distribution company targeting buying clubs and developing market relations with over 20 small clubs in DownEast and Southern Maine. The late Jim Cook, the owner, had a vision that aggregating folks in groups had promise, much like the food coop movement of the 1970’s. He worked with a group in Portland Maine, the Portland Food Coop and delivered organic produce twice monthly to over 50 area residents. The closing of a popular local health food store, and the establishment of a competitor, of which some of the Portland Group did not appreciate, motivated the Portland group. The goal of the group was to form their own, direct market, with farmers. Crown of Maine sources all of its products from Maine farmers, and was the perfect match. This was the first consumer driven food buying club model in Maine making a concerted effort to access local products. They set the example and backdrop to this project.

The distributor was helping pay for buying clubs to get online, and helping them by aggregating the farmers to supply the club. However, it was found that distributors cannot possibly have the capacity to provide the entire services necessary to assist food buying clubs.

Farmer-Driven Services Models

Tide Mill Farm, Edmunds Maine – Carly Delsignore and Aaron Bell championed the cause of buying clubs in DownEast Maine with the help of families in Machias, Eastport, Calais and Lubec. They were delivering to homes in those areas. The customers were gathering friends and relations to purchase fresh milk, cheeses, vegetables and meats. Carly and Aaron were swamped with orders and record keeping was a time consuming process with excel spreadsheets and QuickBooks. Delivery schedules were also quite demanding, and they even provided home

delivery in some cases. Tide Mill Farm was heavily customer focused, and that paid dividends as the clubs built orders. The buying clubs were loosely organized around a central food coordinator who handled the ordering and the books for the club. By 2011 the DownEast buying clubs added additional farmers who had seen the success of Tide Mill Farm.

Western Maine Market was a demonstration online buying club project of Western Mountains Alliance, this project started in 2008, originally using software developed for the Plymouth Local Foods model and then transitioning to an earlier version of the current *Harvest to Market ONLINE™* ordering system from New Hampshire. Tanya Swain, Tricia Cook, Deborah Chadbourne and many others made this market work. This online market was envisioned in the Plymouth model as an add-on to a normal farmer's market where the consumer ordered their products ahead of time and picked up at the farmers market. The Western Maine Market pilot originally partnered with a local grocer to offer a pick up at the store's downtown location.

Cape Farms' Market, located in Cape Elizabeth and operated by Penny Jordan of Jordan Farms had been researching online ordering and started her own online ordering system. Initially geared to helping her customers order products online and pick up at the farmstand, Penny expanded the offerings to other farmer's products, and to a number of drop-off points around the city. She utilized a Zen-Cart type system set up by Jeremy Bloom, creator of BuyingClubSoftware.com, another new online ordering system (described later). This model did not focus on buying clubs, per se, but rather individual consumers much like the Western Maine Market model.

Also prevalent was the use of email ordering and local drop-off points. One example was an ordering system started by **Freedom Farm, in Freedom Maine, and Thirty Mile Farm in Windsor Maine**. These farms were selling in the Portland Market and continued selling year-round by contacting their customers by email, and doing deliveries to drop off points in the city, 80 miles away.

Online Ordering Software Services Model

BuyingClubSoftware.com –is a business which primarily provides buying clubs with an online ordering system. Jeremy Bloom, creator of www.buyingclubsoftware.com, had established the company to implement his online ordering software and manage the transactions for buying clubs. This service was limited to the hosting and technical assistance to setup and manage the system. He also provided promotional services through creating a website for the buying clubs. What was missing from this model was the management of capital needs, and market interactions between farmers and the buying club.

What Works Best

Through all this research and experimentation on ways to provide services to support buying clubs, it became clear that no one model would work perfectly for all the buying club needs. The L3C full services model, while grandiose in scale, may not be a profitable model as overhead expenses must be borne by either the supplier or consumer. The Wholesale Distributor and Farmer Driven models works only so far as the distributor can meet the product intermediary role and meet other service needs like providing the online ordering system. Both work to the benefit of the buying club.

However, a club needs more support for technical services and capital investment. The Buying Club Software services model works for only limited servicing for the online ordering club, and cannot exist in the vacuum without the other services for supply purchasing and capital investment and financial management.

For the buying club movement to be successful, more work is needed for easy procurement methods, ordering efficiency and ease of distribution (storage and breakdown) of perishable commodities. This is much different than in the 1970's when the major buying club movement was for more stable goods such as dried fruits, nuts, flour and herbal products. This movement is also different than the 1980's and current day model of Wholesale and Farmer Driven distribution models where they provide most of the supply and ordering support. While an umbrella organization may work, most likely a combination of methods will show up in the marketplace.

Objective 4: Building A Sustainable Local Foods Buying Club Model That Works

Challenges defined

For a Local Foods Buying Club to be its own independent entity is a challenge. The challenges are:

- To obtain capital for operating the club and overhead investment for cold storage to minimize food safety concerns of government regulators.
- To meet customer needs for convenience of ordering, minimal volunteer work effort for busy moms and professional couples, but maintaining the feel of community.
- To form a governing entity which can perform like a business while maintaining the “feel of” a volunteer, grass-roots community organization.
- To create an entity that is able to independently source fresh food from a wide array of local farms, independent of distributors, and with minimal overhead.

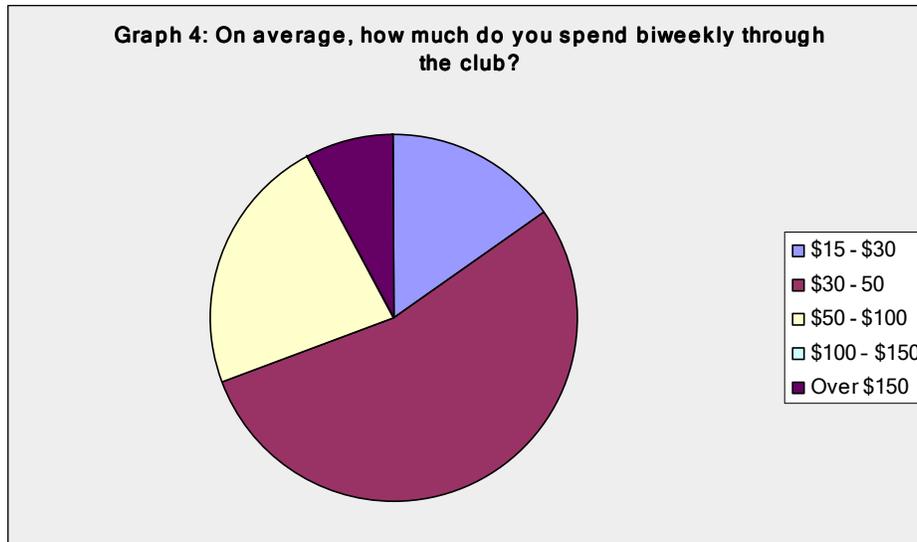
These challenges are being met as the club moves from pilot phase to full sustainability.

Financial Stability

The Department developed a financial analysis tool which any buying club could use to estimate its income and expenses (see attachment)¹². This tool was tested on the DownEast buying clubs and tweaked to be able to do financial “what-ifs” based on variables for sales, overhead expenses and other operating expenses. Using that tool, the Maranacook Local Foods Buying Club determined that, in order to be successful, they needed to establish the financial goals and parameters. Those can be found in the draft Operations Manual¹³ attached to this report.

The Maranacook Local Foods Buying Club coordinator worked with a group of members to evaluate their costs and returns. Three factors were necessary for financial success 1) a high number of members buying in any one order period, and 2) the dollar amount of sales per member must be enough to help cover costs, and 3) Some sort of fee to cover overhead costs for breakdown and bookkeeping.

For this buying club the average number of members ordering has been 50. The graph below gives an idea of the size of the orders. These amounts were deemed good enough to help offset costs for the club.



Ad-hoc members put together a financial analysis to figure out how to pay for ongoing expenses. They built in a fee structure for members so those families who cannot volunteer time can do so through payment of fees to hire that support.

The relationship with the school system has been a key advantage for the club to minimize overhead costs for a breakdown location and for storage of supplies and equipment. The school also uses the club as an educational opportunity for students who help the club with breakdown and packaging orders for customers. This has been a win-win for the school and the club.

Regarding the long-term financing for the club for capital expenses, the club has established a development committee whose ideas include a combination of user/membership fees, fundraisers, direct donation solicitations for both monies and equipment, and working with a fiscal agent to apply for grant funding.

Governance

For governance, Western Mountains Alliance staff worked with the club coordinator and self selected club members to develop a set of bylaws¹⁴ in which to govern the club. Some of the issues needing to be worked out included:

People to handle various tasks of the club, including

- The breakdown of product when the farmer arrives
- Deposit/Payment Coordinator
- New Member Coordinator
- Volunteer Coordinator
- Farmer/Producer Product Availability Coordinator

- Product List Coordinator
- Order Coordinator
- Member Coordinator
- New Farmer Coordinator
- School Contact Coordinator
- Education Coordinator

Other Issues include:

- Establishment of an Advisory Committee
- A Volunteer Requirement
- A fee structure for paying overhead
- Willing to be a paid coordinator
- Organizational Structures – Club Identity

Operating the Club for Convenience and Community

As previously mentioned, the location of the club with the school has been a key component for success. The School Board has a policy to engage students in community service. The teachers encourage using agriculture in the classroom and nutrition units to engage students, and assisting the buying club is a perfect outlet for those objectives. Students help with breakdown, and in some cases delivery of product. In the future, the school garden and the business program may engage with the club to further help offset the workload.

Sourcing Local

One of the initial decisions of the buying club members was to NOT source from distributors, but to source locally first. Here is where the Word-of-Mouth marketing concept pays great dividends to the farmers and the community. The buying club members who have sought out those farmers have done so because they know their farmer, know where their food comes from and want to support them for their community and their children. They know the local farmers are looking for their support. In exchange, the farmers show their interest in the community by working the long hours, providing top quality produce, and providing educational opportunities for the children.

This was most poignantly caught in the recent video produced by club member Dean Gyorgy and available to be viewed at the *Farm Fresh For ME* website. www.fffme.comIt says it all.

Where Do We Go From Here

What the study shows us

The ultimate goal of this project was to just see if we could encourage consumers, through Word-of-Mouth methods, to aggregate themselves around supporting local farm product purchases and the farms in their community. We proved that, for the local food movement, it does not take much effort to develop farmer interest and consumer food advocates.

The farmers who participated know that their marketing costs are lower, but distribution costs could be higher depending on volume. A number of farmers had weekly sales hit \$500, so they understand the potential buying clubs have to their businesses. However, they also said they would have to raise prices if they had to subsidize the administrative overhead of the club. These issues of price fairness and sharing of marketing costs are a negotiating point with the buying club. This is being addressed in the formal written agreements with the farmers as the buying clubs negotiate for fair prices.

Consumers who have developed a strong desire to develop buying clubs span multiple age brackets and appear to be well-educated, aware of the food issues surrounding good health and are interested in supporting local farms. They also have the means to buy local products at slightly increased prices, due to the perceived value of local connections to farmers. They also like the ability to interact with a school system. However, when it comes to volunteerism, some would rather pay out cash not to have to spend time on the distribution functions the club must do.

The food buying club movement is developing, not necessarily due to the financial condition of the economy, but consumers also have a strong desire for better food choices and interest in supporting local farmers. The perennial question is whether buying clubs can eventually enable consumers to realize savings on food purchases since, at this point, consumers are willing to pay a premium for local products and farmers have no incentive to lower their prices. Also to be determined is the ability of small farmers to produce at a scale large enough to reduce the average cost per unit of food. The Readfield area in this pilot study can afford the costs, but what about other areas in Maine? Each community is different, and the only way the buying club could feel comfortable negotiating a lower price with farmers is if the club could guarantee consistent sales of a certain amount.

The pilot buying club documented here is made up of about 50 very motivated families and individuals who have developed relationships with 17 local farmers and small value-added food processors. In three months time they have created an online farmers market potential of over \$1,600 dollars per bi-weekly ordering cycle, or \$50 every two weeks per family (See Table 3 below.)

Table 3 Maranacook Local Foods Buying Club - Average bi-weekly sales

1st cycle 14 buyers	Total: Average Amt	\$529.75 \$14.97
2nd cycle 18 buyers	Total: Average Amt	\$846.04 \$24.02
3rd cycle 26 buyers	Total: Average Amt	\$1524.85 \$49.38
4th cycle 41 buyers	Total: Average Amt	\$1940.08 \$47.04
5th cycle 31 buyers	Total: Average Amt	\$1637.16 \$54.97
6th cycle 44 buyers	Total: Average Amt	\$1816.51 \$41.85

Quite impressive.

What is a Potential Future

Currently Maine has a gross agricultural product of \$577 million, and about 8,136 farms. Of that amount approximately \$75 million can be attributed to direct sales to consumers¹⁵. Average farm gross income is \$75,000 but for small farms which have under \$50,000 in gross sales, they range from \$863 to \$36,000 in gross income¹⁶.

Maine has 602 schools which represent 195,000 families and 187,214 school children.

We hope that more school boards see the successes of this project and how a food buying club links to each piece of the education of students and support for the community. Hopefully that would result in more funds and staffing devoted to this effort, generated by the local community interest for these school programs.

The food buying club model program described here will continue just by the nature of the for-profit model of business success for the market established in Readfield. Farmers will have continual access to aggregated consumers in the community, and can build sales depending on family needs.

If 10 more schools had buying clubs and each buying club generated \$1,500 in bi-weekly sales that would be \$390,000 in increased wealth creation to farmers. If 10% of all schools then adopted this approach, \$2.34 million would be generated statewide - a 3% increase in statewide local sales. These numbers are conservative.

The economic impact to the communities is measured in the increased number of successful small farmers and the percentage increase in their family incomes generated by the small farm products produced for this emerging market. If 15 farms are attached to each buying club, that would be an increase of farm family income of \$2,600 yearly or an increase of 5% for a farm family of two adults and two children on a living wage (\$54,641); or a 15% increase in income for a single person on a living wage (\$17,180)¹⁷. Many small farmers fall into those income categories and any increase in income is meaningful to the family.

The economic impact is also measured by the increase in flow of dollars back to the community from increased employment for youth in the communities, and improvement in local food choices and lowered food costs for the families involved.

The food buying clubs will change over the years with the coming and going of families through the school system. Farmers may also come and go, but as long as these businesses stay profitable, as we think they will, they will continue to exist and add economic impact yearly to local families and small, local farms at the town level.

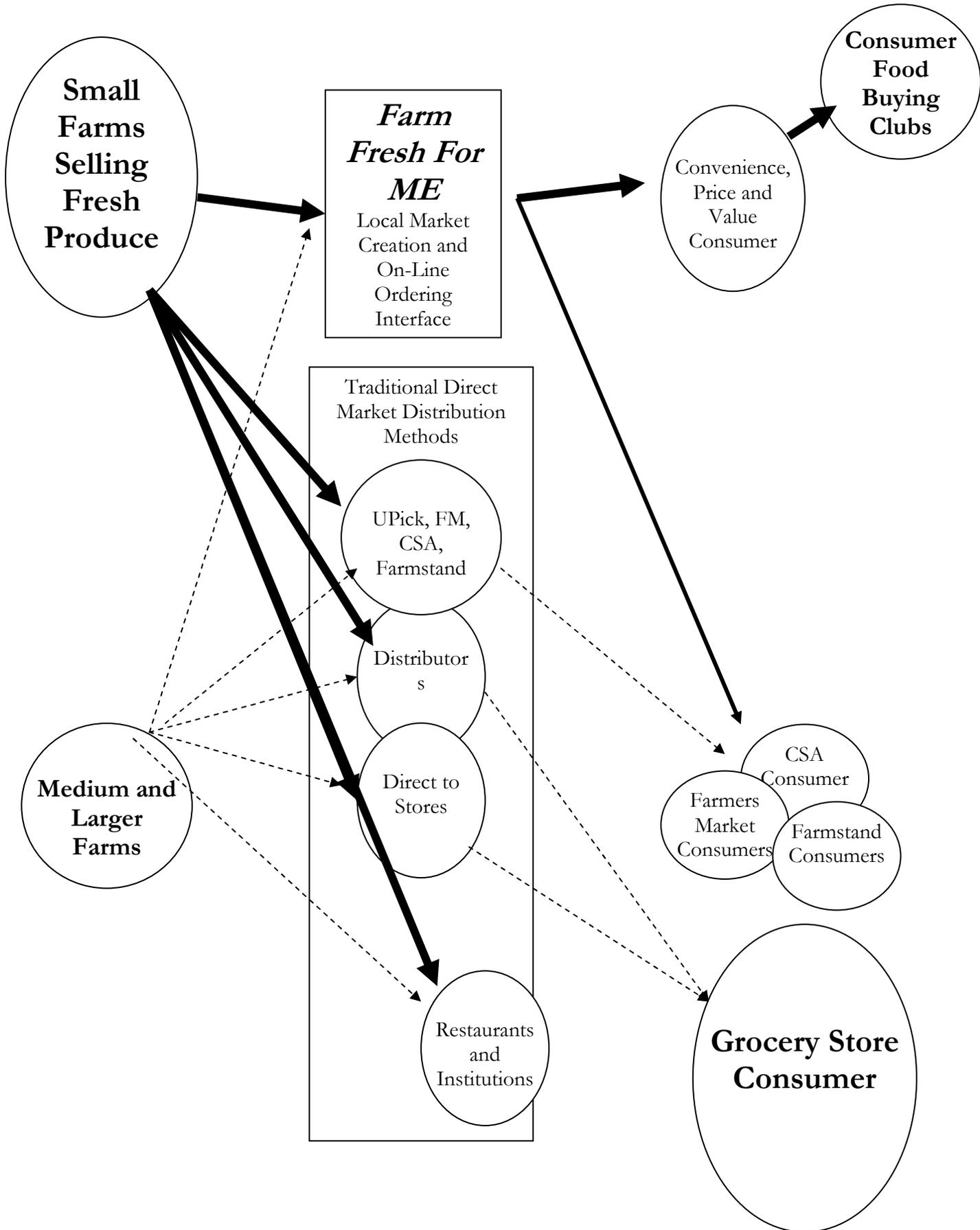
Government's role is to educate and assist development of private enterprise. Nothing could be better than to see more effort created in the schools to educate and engage our children about where their food comes from and to respect the farmers who provide for us. Sustainability of communities depends on it.

For Further Information

The Maine Department of Agriculture and Western Mountains Alliance has set up a website with information on how to set up a consumer buying club, with resources for farmers and consumers on what methods work well to make the connections and promote business for buying local food. Most of the information generated with this project can be found on www.fffme.com.

The Word-of-Mouth Marketing Conference and the Maine Harvest Festival Conference videos share a wealth of information and are available on DVD from the Maine Department of Agriculture, c/o Division of Agricultural Resource Development, 28 State House Station, Augusta, ME 04333 207-287-3491. email: info@getrealmaine.com.

Appendix 1: Food Cluster Map





Your online source for fresh local food from Maine



- HOME
- FAQ'S
- FIND A BUYING CLUB
- START A BUYING CLUB
- RESOURCES

Farm Fresh for ME is a newly established initiative of the [Maine Department of Agriculture](#) in collaboration with [Western Mountains Alliance](#) and other for-profit and NGO's who are supporting development of food buying clubs throughout Maine. The ultimate goal of Farm Fresh for ME is to increase the market for small family farms in their local communities while providing nutritious, healthy and affordable foods to Maine families.

Farm Fresh for ME embraces the concept of consumer food buying clubs. A consumer food buying club pools the demand of several households, allowing them to purchase larger quantities of food at less than full retail price. Local food buying clubs are a wonderful way to help Maine farmers sell more products in a more organized, collective way.

This fall, funding from [USDA](#) and the Maine Department of Agriculture will help **Farm Fresh for ME** pilot an innovative buying club model in [Breadfield](#) where [Maranacook Area School's](#) support will enable student involvement in the project and a distribution site at [Maranacook Middle School](#). Farm Fresh for ME is also seeking to support the development of additional buying clubs. For more information contact Trida Cook at tcook@westernmountainsalliance.org.



Maranacook Buying Club



1

Maranacook Local Foods Buying Club

This is a pilot club relaunching at the beginning of September. To learn more, see the club's [pudelines](#), visit its [website](#) or jump right in and [join the club!](#)

FAQ's



2

3

4

5

Connecting local Farmers and consumers one click at a time

End Notes

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- ¹⁰ Maranacook Online Buying Club 2011 Consumer Survey.
- ¹¹ Maranacook Online Buying Club 2011 Farmer Survey
- ¹² Buying Club Financial Analysis Tool.
- ¹³ Buying Club Operations Manual Sample Draft
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- ¹⁷ Living Wage Calculator, Maine <http://www.livingwage.geog.psu.edu/states/23>