

MARKETING

Shellfish marketing workshop offers proven tactics

BY MURIEL L. HENDRIX

At an April workshop in Portland, Maine on Marketing Shellfish Aquaculture Products, participants were given numerous practical suggestions about ways to get the most money for their product. Presentations included Marketing 101, Branding and Brand Development and Sales and Customer Relations.

During the day, each speaker returned to several key essentials: quality and reliability, connecting the grower story to the product, maintaining a close connection with buyers and potential buyers, participating in local events, using innovative packaging and minimizing time spent on distribution and collection.

IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY

From experienced grower Skip Bennett of Island Creek Oysters in Duxbury, MA, to Jeremy Sewall, Executive Chef at LiNEaGe

in Brookline, MA, to processor-distributor Peter Ramsden of Foley Fish in Boston and director of the East Coast Shellfish Growers Association, Robert Rheault, the bottom line to successful marketing was "Quality." Rheault, who previously owned Moonstone Oysters, urged growers to "pack every oyster as if it had your name on it. Send only the best," he said, and "Sell the uglies under a different name to someplace else."

He advised growers to find a good name for their product (no barnyard or filthy water connotations, no harbors or creeks; but yes to connections with gems or pristine waters or something French), then develop an expressive logo, and spend a lot of time determining how their product is different from others – figure out what it is about their story that makes their product unique.

NEVER STOP MARKETING

"Never stop marketing," he said, explaining that he meant promotion as opposed to advertising. He advocated using

tactics like giving talks and presentations, sending out press releases and writing op-ed articles, taking chefs and food writers on site visits and farm tours (95% of oysters are eaten in restaurants, he noted), setting up a web site and using Facebook, printing t-shirts and hats, arranging events with local wine producers, and going to trade shows, sporting and other events and donating product at some of these.

Rheault told growers to forget the onion sacks and develop well-designed, interesting packaging that expresses why their particular product is unique. He described a helpful marketing tool, a flyer that tells the story of the particular shellfish and is put into the packing box. At a restaurant, he said, it can be used to educate restaurant staff who will share that information with their customers and spread the brand name.

Once their brand is established, he warned growers never to forget that "It is hard to build a brand, but easy to destroy it."

Although he recognized that most growers begin by selling direct to restaurants, once they increase production, he advised using a wholesaler and spending time growing rather than delivering and collecting money. But, he cautioned, "No wholesaler will be as passionate about your product as you." When using a wholesaler, he said growers still need to visit chefs, get feedback, and pay attention to it.

Rheault warned that the issue in the US of pasteurization of all shellfish is merely on hold and will come up again, and that it will not be long before all growers are asked the questions "Are you certified?" and "Are your oysters sustainable?" "It's coming," he said, adding that as for organic certification, "That's gone off the rails. I've thrown up my hands."

Ten Take-Home Messages

1. Always strive for quality
2. Build an identifiable brand
3. Never stop marketing
4. Design creative packaging
5. Be passionate about your product
6. Build a reputation for reliability
7. Have a story and tell it well
8. Search out new markets
9. Be persistent
10. Involve the community



Ray Grizzle of UNH and Tonie Simmons, Muscongus Bay Aquaculture and Dodge Cove Marine Farms with Andy Stevenson of Mook Sea Farm. M. Hendrix photo



Bob Rheault, director of East Coast Shellfish Growers Association with Jeff Payson of Northeast Transport, Waldoboro, ME. M. Hendrix photo



Dave Cheney, Fisherman and Oyster Grower, South Bristol, ME, and Jeff Payson, owner Northeast Transport, Waldoboro, ME. Photo courtesy of Maine Sea Grant

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MARKETING

VITAL REPUTATION

He also warned, as had Sebastian Belle, director of the Maine Aquaculture Association, that if shellfish production continues to increase, prices are bound to slide. One solution, he believes, may be for the East Coast Shellfish Growers Association to market generic oysters to “oyster virgins” in the Midwest and develop buyers there.

Peter Ramsden, who with his wife is the fourth generation to own Foley Fish, a processor based in Boston, MA, reiterated that quality comes first. He also emphasized that the commitment and reliability shown by a grower weighs heavily with his firm (a statement often repeated by other speakers, with Belle saying “Reputation is everything.”) “We sell to hotel restaurants, country clubs and specialty clubs,” Ramsden said. “We have to be able to tell the chef that product is in, no excuses. They don’t want to hear about an onboard that has a clogged fuel line.”

He urged growers to be good communicators with their distributors and let them know if they see a shortage coming up. “The best vendors,” he said, “have a passion for what they do and are always striving to improve their product. But they also run their operations as a business, not a hobby.”

Forget the onion sacks and develop well-designed, interesting packaging that expresses why their particular product is unique.



Bill Silkes, American Mussel Harvesters and Terry Callery, Marketing Consultant *Photo courtesy of Maine Sea Grant*



Tollef Olsen, Aquafarms, LLC and Ocean Approved of Portland, ME. *Photo courtesy of Maine Sea Grant*

WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

Ramsden advised vendors to provide plenty of detail in the story about their product, including information such as if they use farmed or wild seed, growout seed with upwellers, use racks or ocean floor. He suggested explaining how much time product spends in beds, how often it is moved and how it is stored in winter, and to describe their methods of harvest and washing. Also, he said, include any positive environmental features, such as being in a harbor where there is no industrial development, or 75% of the shoreline is conservation protected and strong tidal movement brings in nutrients. “What makes your product different; what makes it better?” he asked.

Tollef Olsen of Portland, Maine, spoke about finding new markets for product. After raising Bang’s Island Mussels in Casco Bay for 10 years, Olsen and his partner, Paul Dobbins, started a side business harvesting wild kelp. They have developed three frozen ready-to-eat kelp products, sold under the name Ocean Approved, and in 2009, they received permission to cultivate kelp.

BE PERSISTENT

Ocean Approved products are carried by some Whole Foods stores and other specialty stores. Olsen says getting into Whole Foods took over a year and a half of persistence. “I kept showing up with the product,” he says, “and I would find different managers in charge. Finally there was one who realized that we had a good product, something they wanted to carry. You have to call up and go back, deal with the manager on a one-on-one basis.” After the success of the first product, Whole Foods was open to subsequent items. Olsen said he has used the same marketing strategy with restaurants and other venues, always taking time to visit in person. “Until I showed up, area chefs weren’t aware that local mussels were available,” he said. “All they knew was PEI mussels.”

Being known for the mussels and having good press about them helped him get into Whole Foods” he noted, saying that their company, AquaFarms LLC, has participated in events like a local Slow Food gathering and Twenty Mile Harvest dinner. “Never underestimate the power of a community event,” he advised.

The workshop was sponsored by Maine Sea Grant in collaboration with University of Maine Cooperative Extension, Maine Aquaculture Association, Maine Aquaculture Innovation Center, East Coast Shellfish Growers Association, Connecticut Sea Grant and Salem State University. Maine Sea Grant is creating a CD of all presentations for participants. The CD can be ordered by contacting Dana Morse at www.seagrant.umaine.edu or by phone, (207) 563-3146 x 205.

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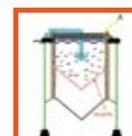
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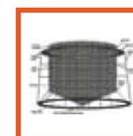
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