



Farm to Institution Market Readiness Food Service Buyer Interview

Communication is key to successful marketing and sales. Use these questions as a start-off point to gain an understanding of the institution’s food service operations and what you need to know to make sales, whether directly or through a distributor.

Name of Buyer:
Name of Institution:
Employer (if different from the institution – E.g. BOCES, Food Service Management Company, non-profit, etc.):
Address:
Email:
Phone:
Web site:

Questions to understand the buyer’s program and operations, and generate conversation

- How many meals served on average each day? # of meals/year?
- Frequency of meals: per day; #day per week, seasonal? school year, summer meals, year-round?
- Do you have a “buy local” program that sources food from New York farms? Tell us about it.
- What kind of farm products? fresh produce frozen fruits and vegetables
 milk yogurt cheese ice cream eggs meat
 Other _____
- Can you give an example of how you establish your selection of local products?

- Does your institution have a “buy local” procurement policy? Goals (such as with Sustainability program, AASHE STARS, Real Food Challenge)
- If you contract with a food service management company, are the policy and goals included in the request for bids and contracts?
- Does your program receive funding for purchasing New York grown foods?
- Does your institution have educational programs such as a garden curriculum, nutrition and culinary lessons, visits from farmers, fieldtrips to farms?
- Do you purchase direct from farmers? From cooperatives or a food hub? Which ones?
- Do you have distributors who work with you to source from local farms? Who are those distributors?
- Are you required to buy from “approved” and “preferred” vendors, or through state-contracted vendors? Do you have flexibility to purchase from other vendors and direct from farmers?

Questions on business management practices

- Communication & Relationship building
 - How would you prefer growers to contact you initially?
 - How do you prefer to communicate with growers after they become suppliers?
 - Why is open communication so important between you and your growers?
- Packaging
 - What is the best way to package for your needs? E.g. size of cartons and bags – maximum weight, minimum container sizes.
- Labeling
 - What types of labels do you want to see on packages and cartons?
 - What type of information should be included on labels?
- Pricing and Purchasing Procedures
 - How do you prefer to talk about pricing? What do you want your suppliers to know about pricing?

- What are the types of bid procedures you use? Do you request prices weekly or monthly or for a yearly contract?
- What is the key to negotiating fair prices between buyers and suppliers?
- Supply
 - Are you willing to purchase smaller volumes of a specific products from a farmer, for example for one school rather than district-wide, or for a weekly New York menu ?
 - Are you able to forecast volume you want to buy, and issue a Purchase Order for a period of time (school semester, quarterly, etc)?
 - What do producers need to know and do in order to remain your supplier?
- Delivery
 - When is the best time for delivery?
 - Do you do pick-ups from farms or other suppliers?
- Storage
 - What do producers need to know about your storage space?
- Invoicing
 - How do you want an invoice to look? What information do you need to see on it?
 - What is the invoice payment process in your institution?
- Insurance
 - How much liability insurance does your institution require?
- Quality assurance, temperature control, food safety
 - What type of information do you ask from farmers to assure food safety?
 - Do you require farm food safety plans? Third-party certification?
 - Do you have required temperature protocols?
- Satisfaction guarantee
 - What types of satisfaction guarantee are important to you?
 - Do you have any examples of this from other suppliers?

- Marketing
 - Do you tell the story of where the food comes from to your customers?
 - What do farmers need to know about your customers?
 - What is most important to your customers?
 - Are there marketing/merchandising resources you would like to see growers provide to help your “local” program?
 - Do you have a Harvest of the Month or monthly or weekly menu featuring New York farm-grown foods (such as “New York Thursdays”)?
- Thank you for your time!
- What are the next steps?
 - Do you need to provide the buyer with more information, to answer his/her questions or concerns?
 - Should you provide samples?
 - If the buyer wants to get your products through a distributor/approved vendor, when will s/he communicate that to the distributor? Should there be a conference call or meeting with the buyer and distributor?
 - Ask for vendor requirement checklists, application form, samples of marketing materials, etc.

Adapted for Farm to Institution New York State Market Readiness <https://finys.org>
 from the MarketReady™ Training Program, University of Kentucky College of Agriculture

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