

The Southern Fruitcast

Episode 9: Marketing Small Fruits

with Ekko Barnhill



[Intro] Thanks for tuning into the Southern Fruitcast. This podcast aims to cover the people, technology, and latest developments in small fruit production in the Southeast. We were brought to you by the Southern Region Small Fruit Consortium and the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture.

[Cato] I am Dr. Aaron Cato, Extension Specialist for Commercial Fruit and Vegetable IPM at the University of Arkansas.

[McWhirt] And I'm Dr. Amanda McWhirt, Extension Production Specialist for Fruits and Vegetables at the University of Arkansas.

[McWhirt] All right, everyone, welcome back to the Southern Fruitcast. Today we have Ekko Barnhill as our guest and she helps manage Barnhill Orchards with her brother and parents in Lonoke, Arkansas, which is about 40 minutes east of Little Rock. The farm was started in 1980 by Bob and Carlotta Barnhill, who are Ekko's parents and the family have a strong and proud military background with all five of their children having served in active duty. There are now three generations of the family employed on the farm. Growing is managed by Ekko's brother Rex, and they grow fruits, vegetables with sales 12 months of the year to farmers, markets, restaurants and through their farm store. Ekko, however, is the powerhouse behind their marketing, and we're really glad to have her here today to talk a little bit about marketing for small farms and see what she had, what wisdom she has to share with us. So, Ekko, thank you so much for joining us today.

[Barnhill] Hey, thanks, Amanda, and welcome to Barnhill Orchards.

[McWhirt] Thank you.

[Cato] So let's get started with questions. So first off, could you just start off by telling us a bit about what you'll grow at Barnhill Orchards?

[Barnhill] Yeah, I certainly can. As Amanda was saying, we're just a small family farm, so we grow quite a few products, both fruits and vegetables. And the one of the secrets to our success is that we do successive planting. So we're not a huge farm, we don't have fields and fields of product. We just grow a lot of product often and constantly picking

and harvesting. So saying that, we grow the basics, we start with squash, zucchini, okra, cucumbers, tomatoes, corn, potatoes, onions, pretty much anything you're going to see at a farmer's market. And we also do some watermelons and cantaloupes, but our main focus right now is on our cane fruit and our tree fruit, and that's going to include our blackberries, blueberries, and this year we got some raspberries coming on. We do strawberries. And for our trees, our main crop is peaches. And we do have some smaller number of fruit trees, apples and pears. And we also dabble a little bit in some grapes. All of our fruits and vegetables are hand-picked, so there's no combines out there or anything else. So everything that a customer gets, it's all hand-picked and hand looked at and we have found that fruit will always sell. Last year we sold everything. Every bit of fruit that we could possibly pick was sold. Matter of fact we could have sold a lot more. Needless to say, our overall marketing has changed dramatically. So I would say the lesson I've learned right off the bat is to have a market. You need to be able to grow or be able to sort of be able to source a variety of fruits and vegetables. Customers like a one stop shop. So you need to have fruits and vegetables to make a successful farmers market and to keep your customers coming back.

[McWhirt] That's great, Ekko. You know, you all have been farming for quite a while in Lonoke and you know, even in the time that I've known you, I've seen that you've kind of shifted the crops that you focus on, but still kind of maintaining that diversity. Can you talk a little bit about how your marketing strategy has evolved over time?

[Barnhill] All right. We started our farming back in about 1980, and that was with a small sign on the side of a gravel road. We were very small back then, and that worked out perfect for us, you know, as limited income, minimal expenses. And we offered bulk purchases for canning - tomatoes, wholesale products - and most of our customers were elderly customers coming in to fill up their pantries. But as time passed, the local clients started slowing down and bulk buys were no more. And we started realizing that small, you know, being small is no longer an option. So to increase our sales, we needed to increase visibility. And so what we did was moved down to our farm corner market, which is a building on the corner of two main roads, Highway 89 and Sandhill Road. And that tremendously increased our visibility. And people were no longer a little bit fearful of driving up a gravel road or a side road. They could just stop right on the main road, and that was very helpful for us. So we built a corner market and that gradually included a cooler, a display area, air conditioning, water and a sales area. Pretty much everything we needed to run a business was down now at our corner market and every year we upgraded the stand. We did changed and adapted and grew. And fast forward to now, I'd say our customers average about 35 years old and they're looking for something to

eat today and tomorrow. So not next week or not for canning, but just right now. And it's the same people we see coming back about every other day and they're all looking for fruit. They've got the kids in the car and the dogs and they don't have time or they don't even want to come inside. They just want to come through the drive-thru, pick up their snacks and their goodies and move. So I learned is develop a business plan that grows your business gradually and keep it updated as conditions evolve.

[McWhirt] That's great. A lot of really great insight. Can you talk a little bit about how the expansion in your production of small fruits, specifically strawberries and blackberries, has played into your marketing strategy?

[Barnhill] This year we've changed our strategy somewhat to increase our fruit production in the areas of the blackberries, blueberries, raspberries and peaches by several acres. I spent this winter doing quite a bit of research into different types of blackberries and blueberries to purchase and plant looking for plants that come off in the early, early season, mid-season and late season. And the reason that's important is you want to be able to sell fruit for the entire season. You just don't want to have one crop come off and that's all you have. So as a whole, sales offers, you know, your let me start over. So kind of as a whole, your opportunity to sell is a very small window. So you have to grab your customer when they come by or they're not going to come back. And we do know that fruit attracts customers. So it's ideal for fruit seasons to not only have varieties, say, strawberries, blackberries, blueberries and then maybe even some peaches. You want those seasons to overlap, which they naturally do. And like I said previously, you want within a variety, you want to have early, mid and late season. So you constantly have fruit overflowing for your customers to choose from. So what we do specifically is we start in the spring with our strawberries, then we move to blackberries and then blueberries. And then the peaches and. Like I said, it's ideal. You want to have all, all varieties and early, mid and late season products so that there's always produce for the customer to buy. The last thing that you want happening is the customer to drive by and say, Hey, I want some blueberries, and you just say, I'm sorry we don't have any because they're going to go to another customer or they're going to go to Walmart. So you want to always try to have fruit available for your customers. So my lesson learned on this one is that, you know, planting more fruit may or may not always be a good investment because the more fruit you plant also means the more fruit you have to sell, and fruit has to be picked when it's ready. So it's all about sales, sales and actually more sales. So what you really need to do is have a backup plan as to how are you going to move your fruit. And if you have excess fruit, how are you going to move that excess fruit?

[McWhirt] Yeah. So, you know, you're doing something interesting. It sounds like we were really using these fruit crops that are kind of, you know, really attractive to consumers to get them to come out to the farm and then possibly they're buying some other stuff while they're there as well. But you bring up an interesting, you know, topic that thinking about fruit because it's perishable, you know, and you have to be aware of your, um, the size of your market. Can you talk about some of those specific considerations that you've taken into account when you're trying to market those small fruits?

[Barnhill] I can. One thing for sure is fruit doesn't wait for the market. You know, it has to be picked every day whether you have sales or not. So you got to have a backup plan. Like I said, squash, zucchini, okra, cucumbers, those vegetables you can always have out there. And customers usually want those. But like I said, they're always looking for your fruit. And our one of our strategies we have on selling fruit is offering a fair price. And we have also found that fast friendly service and convenience is a great -that's a great marketing tool and it keeps the customers coming back. So we've got our - and I say all this is having your friendly faces out there because we do a drive-thru and it's constant, one car after the next. And it's hard to maintain that constant composure, but it's ideal to have a good customer relation. That really goes a long way. And – let's see – some of the other marketing strategies, I would say is you need to have a business phone and the business phone should not be at your house or anywhere else other than in your back pocket because your job is to answer it when it rings and to address any issues. I was reading in another study that said that 65% of customers may not come back if they had bad service. And in addition to that, 15% won't come back if their customers aren't addressed. So we're talking about a whopping like 80% chance that a customer who's not happy if he wasn't communicated with appropriately is not going to be coming back. And you're and so one might think, well, that's just one person, big deal. But in a local farm, your reputation is based on your customer satisfaction. They're going to go out and they're going to tell their friends, Hey, you know what? I went so-and-so and I got bad service. Or on the flip side, hey, I went to Barnhill Orchards, man. They were nice and they were friendly and they were helpful and it was all great. So, you know, their friends are going to come out. So it makes a big difference on customer service. So you want to make that one of your biggest strategies that you have. And as for advertising, we just use Facebook and Instagram. That works for us. We don't use any other advertising. And it's so talking about electronics, you gotta get a smart phone because you got to be taking credit cards. That is a number one. You will increase sales dramatically by having a square card or any other card, any other device that's going to take a credit card from a customer. We'll have them we'll have customers come in and

say, well, I'll take this, this and this. And then they'll ask, Do you take credit cards? And I'll say, Yes, we do. And they'll say, okay, well, I also want this, this and this. So they always tend to have add ons. If that if they if you take credit. You need to get an iPad. And that also takes your sales and your credit cards. And it's also great for inventory. You're going to have to have a computer or your iPad. You got to develop a website and you need to set up an online market, which I'll talk a little bit about in a minute. The market has been huge. People love the aspect of pre ordering. Then they drive and they pick-up the order. They, you know, they'll say, hey, I'm order number 62. I walk in for 62. You bring it out. Put it in their car. Off they go. No lines, no waiting, no fuss, no muss. They absolutely love the online. That's been huge. I guess to say that my lesson learned is going to be, you know, set up in small steps to grow all areas of your sales and marketing. Because I would say success in small steps is better than a failure in a large leap. You know, it's all about growing every year. Don't try to say, hey, I'm going to be this big-time farmer because we've been doing this for like 40 years. And every year I add a little bit more and a little bit more. So it's okay to go slow.

[Cato] I think that's some interesting points because when we get questions a lot of times from people that want to start growing, you know, I think the question Amanda always asks them is, how are you going to sell your fruit? And it seems like there's a lot that goes into that. And so, you know, it also seems like you're using the kind of the fruit, as Amanda said, to market other stuff when you're on your farm. But could you go through a little bit some of the key marketing strategies you kind of use farm-wide that's led to success?

[Barnhill] Well, what we kind of keep in mind is supply versus demand. And you have to stay on your inventory, you know. And that's for a lot of reasons. If you want to have enough inventory to support your customers and you also want to manage your waste, fruit needs to move very quickly. It's not like a squash or a zucchini where you can kind of put it away for a couple of days. And it holds just fine because if you're not selling it that day or you don't have a home for it, you've just lost a lot of money. So ideally you want to sell your fruit where you're going to make the most money. And we have three different ways where we sell fruit here at Barnhill Orchards. The first way we do is we just sell it directly to the public right down at our corner market. And that's where you're going to get your best price, your best bang for the buck. But that also requires more work. So, you know, you've got packaging, you've got advertising, employees, you've got signage, you've got lots of one-on-one contact and it's six or seven days a week and it can be tiring. So you've got that trade-off, you've got a best price, but you've got to get a lot of work you've got to put into it. And the other market we have is the farmers

markets, and that's a quick sale, but it's a very short amount of time and you only have limited sales. It's all dependent on someone shows up or you've got the weather or what if you show up another farmer, you know, they've got the same product and that could cause your price to drop. And also at farmers markets, you always got to know that tails off at the end of August. So you've got a specific time frame you have to stay within. And then our last one we do is we do local stores and restaurants, and that's all about how we can sell a larger quantity of product. But the trade-off is that you get a lower price. Now, on the upside, the product can be sold quickly. I can contact him and say, Hey, I've got a I've got so many pounds of potatoes, can you use these? And they're like, Yeah, sure, bring them in. You know, bring them in for us and we can use them. But the down point is that your prices are matched against other products, say, you know, like from Mexico or California. And when you talk about strawberries, you know, California selling strawberries pretty much year-round and they wait for our season to come in. And what happens when local strawberries come in, California automatically, pretty much, drops their prices because they have to compete with local, you know, local fruit and vegetables and they're willing to lose money during our sales season. So, one of the comments that we always get is, you know what, I can go get this at Wal-Mart, the prices are lower and that's true. But that's usually because they've dropped their prices because we're in peak season. So what's my lesson learned on this is that we have figured out what NOT to market. So, muscadines come off after the growing season in late August and September, so it's not an easy crop to sell. We used to try to do that and it just didn't work out for us. Same thing with persimmons and pecans, so know what product is going to be available and know that you've got a customer there to buy it. That's the bottom line.

[McWhirt] All great advice, Ekko. You know, one thing, living in Little Rock, you know, we're not too far from you. And usually when I go around to go to a restaurant or go to a brewery, it's not too uncommon that I don't always see your name on the menu. And I think this is something that has been interesting to me that you've done, where you've really partnered with a lot of local breweries and coffee shops and restaurants to get your ingredients into different things that they're doing. Can you tell us a little bit more about how you've developed this part of your business and how it contributes to your overall marketing strategy?

[Barnhill] Sure. We didn't start out with restaurant sales that kind of grew as our farm grew. And the sales the restaurant sales were initiated because we attended farmers markets. So when you do, you have a lot of local chefs will come out to the farmers markets to buy their fresh produce and you interact with them. And we talked with them

and they saw our product. And like a good example of that is David's Burgers. Their owner came out and one day I was working the farm stand and he started looking at lettuce and I said, Well, how could I help you? And he was telling me he needed a kind of lettuce to go on his hamburgers and he needed this, that, and he set out his specifications. And at that time I had about four lettuces available and I pointed them right to where I knew he needed to go. I said, You need to try out this lettuce right here. And sure enough, he took that lettuce home and within a short amount of time called back and said, You know what, we want to do business with you, and you're going to find that with restaurants. They want to buy local. So your job is to get your foot in the door and develop a relationship with the restaurant. You can set up a time to go in and pitch your product because they want to buy from you. You know, you're not pushing your product on them. Another thing that I do is I invite the restaurants to come out to the farm, and once they come out and get the tour, they see where their produce comes from and they also see what else is available. And then they are all over me with wanting me to provide them additional produce. And another good thing is that and then they advertise for us because they're gonna put up signs and say, Hey, our products or our produce that we're selling or our hamburgers get lettuce from Barnhill Orchards, and then those customers come out to the farm and then they bring their family. So it's a really it's a win-win, but there's a little bit of downside to it is that you've got to keep the restaurants updated on product availability, and all of that takes time. You're going to have to load your truck up, you have to have transportation to bring it in and it takes your time. You've got a lot of documentation that goes with it. And I would say this, prior to COVID, restaurants made up about one third of our business. So it was pretty significant and I was on that program. But after COVID, our sales to restaurants significantly dropped, except pretty much in the area of fruit, because they were still able to sell fruit in some of their markets that they were running themselves. But everything else just the bottom dropped out of it. So I guess my lesson to be learned here is restaurants are a good way to sell bulk quantities of produce, but weigh the pros and cons to see if it's the right kind of business for you.

[Cato] I think that was really good. And you brought up a good point, which leads us into the next question we were going to ask you, and that's COVID-19. And so I think every time we talk to people on the podcast, we always ask, you know, how has it changed what you're talking about? And, you know, you've already mentioned with restaurants kind of not being as big of a market because people aren't going out as much that you've lost sales there. But how have you adapted your marketing strategy over the last year due to the virus?

[Barnhill] Surprisingly, the pandemic helped our business quite a bit. We lost our restaurant business, and we lost our farmer's market sales, but we picked up sales at our farm, at our corner market, because now all of our produce is going to be sold at one location. So COVID, our new strategy with COVID was to pivot our fruit and vegetable sales to local sales right there on the farm. So, the customers would come out on a regular basis. They'd come out from Little Rock or Cabot or surrounding towns from all over, and they would make it a road trip and they'd enjoy seeing where their fruit is grown. They like the actual customer interaction. They like talking to the farmer or the sales, and they just want to know everything about produce. They asked me all kinds of questions. So we redesigned the corner market to accommodate the new COVID restrictions. So we're no longer an indoor market, but now we have an outdoor drive-thru and we also developed an online business and that's proven very successful for us. But the downside is that it requires quite a few more employees. There's lots of prep work. You've got the drive-thru access, managing the line of cars. I mean there's so many more issues that we had to think about when we then when we just had a closed in corner market. One of the things we found with our drive-thru was that restricting customer access and that's having them stay in their vehicles. Some of the customers still want to come out. And I would notice when I would look down the line of other cars of people coming through the drive-thru, that they would look a little bit more concerned. And I don't say panicked, but they would just watch. They think customers feel safe when other customers and they themselves stay in their cars and just drive-thru. And a drive-thru means we can service more customers in a short amount of time. So what we do as our business down at the corner market is we practice the social distancing, we wear our mask and we'll place the products in the trunks or the back seats and we wipe the credit cards when we get done. So when it's after a customer comes through your drive-thru, they feel that they have, one, been treated courteously and they feel safe and that makes them feel that their product is going to be safe and they're comfortable with us and I know they're going to come back. Right now, the online we talked about that that provides an alternative to the drive-thru or to a standalone store if you're still letting people come in. And the great thing about the online is it's not subject to weather, space limitations, employee issues or anything else. And you also so you're going to reach your regular customers because you'll let them know, hey, you know what, you can now purchase this online, but there's also a whole another set of customers that aren't going to come out to your farm, say, to go through your regular line. They like to buy online. And this has been come you know, this came across really significant like through Wal-mart. I never thought that anybody would ever do that. And I talked to my sister-in-law and she says, well, I do it all the time. And I'm

like, What? So people really like it. We tried it this last year and it was a phenomenal success for us. They really, really like it. But the downside is for the farmer is that the online requires the product on your iPad or however they're seeing it. It's got to be updated regularly. You got to have set up points, packaging, customer contact and issues, product availability. So there's a lot that goes in with an online service. So it's not something to walk in on lightly, know that it's going to take a lot of time and effort and energy to get that set up. But once you get it, it's a very successful way to push your fruits and vegetables. So I guess my lesson learned here is consider an online business. It's quite profitable for bringing in more customers.

[McWhirt] That's great. Well, Ekko, we just have one more question for you today. And that's kind of looking towards the future and asking, you know, what kind of hurdles do you see before you keep the farm growing in and successful into the future?

[Barnhill] Well, first off, I'm going to say is I think pretty much. Hurdles for farmers are very consistent. And I think the number one issue is always employees. So we're trying to keep labor down at our corner market and finding reliable and dependable help that shows up. It's extremely difficult. Thankfully, we're a family business and we can kind of pull from family, but still it's difficult to find employees. And the second one is most farmers, if you get larger, pull from what we call an H-2A program, and that's where we hire people from out of country to come help us in every aspect of growing, in every aspect of growing our produce. And that program is getting difficult as well. And as I talk about all these points, let me say that growing fruit is the easiest part of the whole fruit process. The largest hurdles you've got to have is you've got to harvest your fruit. It's got to be packaged and it's got to be sold and you've got to have a place to sell it. And each of these are separate steps that you've got to think about in a very timely fashion. And before you plant your first plant, so you don't want to wait until you have your box of fruit in your hands and try to figure out, hey, what am I going to do with this? All right. So I guess the key to take away with all of this is that you need to have your products sold before you plant your first plant. You've got to have your business and a marketing plan. And ideally, you want to start small and just expand as you go. As we've learned here at Barnhill Orchards don't plan on this being your livelihood unless you're willing to work about 24/7, you know, to grow your strong business because it's going to take a while. The upfront costs, they take several years to come into the black and even think about starting to make money. And even if you're going to plant berries and you're going to plant your peach seed, the berries take about a year or two to come on and your peach trees will be about four years. So in the meantime, you've got a lot of expenses, but no income coming in if you're just depending on this. So you want to start

with your vegetables. So if you're already growing some vegetables, start to start your business a little bit. Get people used to coming out, come into your farm and you might tell them, Hey, fruits on the way, or if you're already doing some fruit, we're going to continue to grow more fruit. So let them know what's coming up. And the people need to know that you're a reliable market. Another way you could do it is you could consider purchasing from other farmers to supplement your sales. But I will say about that is you got to be very wary because their product becomes your reputation. So make sure you know your provider. And if you're going to get outside product, just know the quality of what you're getting. And I guess I'll end with this is that always look to the upside, you know, focus on what works and how to expand that concept, be open to new ideas and you know what works for your business and just grow those ideas.

[McWhirt] Well, Ekko, we really appreciate your time today, as always. You're full of great ideas and we look forward to coming out and seeing you hopefully sometime this year and wish you the best this season.

[Barnhill] Thanks, Amanda. Thanks, Aaron. I appreciate it.

[Cato] Thanks, Ekko.

[Out – Cato] Thanks for tuning in to the Southern Fruitcast. Our episodes are hosted by PodBean and also can be accessed on the University of Arkansas Extension website at uaex.uada.edu/southernfruitcast. Here you can see all of our episodes and provide us feedback to help shape future episodes of this podcast.

[Out – McWhirt] We'd again like to thank the Southern Region Small Fruit Consortium for funding this podcast. The consortium provides a large library of production and integrated pest management resources at smallfruits.org. We'll be back again soon with more updates on the Southeast small fruit industry and interviews with specialist researchers and farmers from across the region.