



FoodHub in the News

Sustainable Industries

June 16, 2011

By Jonathan Hiskes

FoodHub learns what farmers and local buyers need

FoodHub, a sort of food-focused Match.com/Facebook/Craigslist, launched a year and a half ago with the goal of helping local food growers and buyers find each other and do business online. Farmers can join to see what restaurants and other buyers are seeking, and buyers can search the listings to see what farmers are offering.

It's a product of the Portland non-profit Ecotrust. I chatted with Amanda Osborne, FoodHub's sales and marketing director, to find out what she's learned in the project's first 18 months. Quite a bit, it turns out.

First, many customers aren't ready to pay for a new type of service. The site launched in January 2010 with a \$100 membership fee, but growth was disappointingly slow. After a year, the site had attracted only 740 members, mostly in the Portland area, Osborne said.

"We learned pretty quickly that this was prohibitive for people, because we're working in a new category," she said. "None of it works without a critical mass and enough people to generate networking opportunities."

FoodHub dropped the fee a few months ago and saw membership jump to about 2,200, she said. But Ecotrust still wants to make the site self-sustaining. Next month it will unveil a premium level that offers advertising and other special services, Osborne said. But it will keep the free option.

Second, the project found a ripe market in institutional buyers – schools, hospitals and the like.

"A lot of energy has been put into consumers eating sustainably (growing their own and shopping via farmers' markets and CSAs), but relatively little on the institutional food chain," Osborne said in an email. "That's really where FoodHub is focused."

FoodHub designers spent time talking to restaurant chefs and school cooks to find out what kept them from buying local food. Many family farmers deal in volumes too small to be useful to restaurants, they heard. And busy commercial kitchens didn't have time for 10 separate deliveries during the day. Hospital kitchens wanted things like pre-peeled carrots and potatoes that farmers weren't offering.

The site allows buyers to find items available through large-scale distributors. It also helps distribute fresh sheets of the latest produce, as Deborah Kane of Ecotrust told Sustainable Industries last winter.

“Rural producers typically have a hard time figuring out who is buying and selling what in any urban market,” Kane said. “It takes time and labor to do research on things like slow food. It is a barrier to entry.”

The site also requires users to provide accurate, specific contact information, rather than just a generic main phone number. That’s something farmers have found useful, Osborne said.

So far, the site is focused on Washington, Oregon and nearby states. But it plans to expand, Osborne said.

URL: <http://sustainableindustries.com/articles/2011/06/foodhub-learns-what-farmers-and-local-food-buyers-need>