

Building Food Systems Through Relationships

Of all the components of local and regional food systems, the production of relationships might be one of the most important.

Relationships are critical for producers who choose to market their product themselves, either directly to a consumer at a farmers' market or directly to a wholesale business, said presenters at the 2018 "Harvesting Opportunity in Kansas" symposium in Lawrence.

In fact, said Debra Tropp, a former deputy director with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Marketing Service's Marketing Service who spoke at the symposium, it may be more important to know a producer than to be concerned with the number of miles the product traveled to a purchaser.

"Local food is about transparency and relationships," Tropp said, "not so much about geography."

Relationships are a key part of any successful business, "whether it's agriculture or watchmaking – it doesn't matter," said Cherie Schenker, owner of the McCune Farm to Market grocery store and Schenker Family Farms in southeast Kansas.

"You form a relationship with customers, producers, and vendors, and those are relationships that you build on," she said. "And customers want to put a face on the product they are buying."

Schenker has built relationships with other local producers for years.

"We know who's growing what for the most part in our area," she said. "We interact with them at extension meetings, at farmers' markets, and meetings (like Harvesting Opportunity in Kansas) and more. We're not just forming relationships, we're forming a community, and that gives you potential resources to draw on."

They already knew, for instance, a local producer who could teach a recent sauerkraut class at their grocery store. And that producer didn't just have the skills to make sauerkraut, but also grew the cabbage used in the dish.

"When you can teach someone how to utilize food in that way, it creates another connection," Schenker said. "I think education is a huge, huge, huge part of connecting agriculture to consumers. The easiest way to educate someone is through their stomach."

Rebecca McMahon, a horticulture agent for K-State Research and Extension-Sedgwick County, helps producers build the relationships they need to grow their businesses. In Sedgwick County, that also means helping facilitate conversations between the urban world of the state's largest city – Wichita – and also the rural world of Sedgwick County, populated in large part by diverse agriculture operations.

The conversations help build not just individual businesses, but also build communities, she said.

“It is very clear, from ‘Harvesting Opportunity’ and other meetings and resources that the rural communities that are thriving have found ways to capitalize on the urban resources closest to them,” McMahon said. “The rural communities that are declining are the ones that don’t have those urban relationships.”

Because of her role with Extension, McMahon is often the first call from individuals, non-profits and businesses looking to start markets or find markets in which to sell their product.

One concept that could elevate those connections and build deeper, more sustainable relationships is that of the “value chain coordinator,” an individual who is tasked with working in all aspects of the food system to make connections, to provide education, and to leverage resources.

Investing in such a person, McMahon said, could elevate all of the existing work in her local and regional food system.

“Building that capacity is so important,” she said. “For a municipality, or any organization, even a county Extension office, if they want to be involved in local food system work, it’s important to have someone who understand that building those relationships is their job.”