



## Virtual Farmers' Markets

**Set up your own virtual farmers' market to reach a wider range of customers without even leaving the farm.**

By Jamie Henneman

As the power of the Internet continues to grow, it's become a networking and sales tool for agronomists of all sizes.

Today, if you want your farm business to get noticed, you can hit the streets as a vendor at a local farmers' market, or you can hit the web with a virtual farmers' market of your own.

Here are some basics to consider when breaking into the online market: Decide what you want from your farmers' market website. Check out some of the better-known sites to get a feel for some user-friendly formats.

Determine your start-up costs. Website creation, updates and hosting can easily cost a couple thousand dollars, unless you're lucky enough to have your own computer skills or an interested farmer who can do the work in exchange for being part of your website.

Secure consistent vendors. Network with the regular vendors at your local farmers' market, and see what items they may like to sell online as well. Because local farmers' markets are usually seasonal, virtual farmers' markets allow vendors to have an expanded season and possibly pursue the production of off-season crops (like greenhouse lettuces and greens) or items that store through the winter (such as potatoes, carrots, squash or frozen meat items). Having a varied selection that is regularly updated can keep people coming back to your website.

Pin down your logistics. It's important to determine from the outset how the website will be self-supporting or bring in a profit. Most virtual farmers' markets operate under the same rules as an in-person market; the vendor pays a commission fee to the market, usually based on gross sales. For an online system, this could be a monthly fee to simplify things.

Finally ...

Also, a product pick-up spot needs to be determined for regular customer pickups.

Organically minded restaurants or natural-food stores may be willing to do this, as it helps bring in more business for them, as well.

Most of all, a virtual market needs to have that same "connectedness" that people experience at a live market.

Prompt responses to e-mails, regular product updates and efficiency in the pick-up process are all key to letting the consumer know this is just like the live market, maybe better.