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connecting with local food producers, virtually

➔ ISSUE



Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Fairs allow for people to interact with farms and gain insight into the kinds of products that farms will offer in the coming year. CSAs allow farms to share the risk and benefits of growing food with consumers in the area. Fairs often feature tables or booths of farms, where customers can meet farmers and learn about the upcoming CSA season. With social distancing guidelines, many CSA Fairs were no longer possible this season.

➔ INNOVATION



Several states were able to combine various CSA Fairs to create state-wide virtual CSA Fairs that featured farmers from around the region or state. In order to allow time and space for customers to get a similar experience as an in-person fair, virtual CSA Fairs featured meet-and-greets with farmers, social media posts highlighting various aspects of the farms, and opportunities for customers to ask questions about the availability of produce and other details about this year's CSA share from each farm.

➔ OUTCOME



Organizers from each state reported positive impacts of the Virtual CSA Fairs and plan to move forward in the coming years with adaptations of the event. Significantly, organizers also explained the presence of first-time CSA customers. This creates the potential for a strong positive impact on local food systems. In addition, organizers reported positive feedback from farmers, who appreciated the time to potential benefit ratio of the online events, as compared to in-person CSA fairs.



Facebook Cover Photo from the Kentucky Virtual CSA Fair Facebook event.

Virtual CSA Fairs

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) models have grown in popularity in recent years. In CSA programs, consumers are directly connected with farms in their area. Initially, customers paid months prior to receiving produce. By paying upfront for a seasons' worth of produce, meat, or other value-added products, customers share some of the risks and benefits of farming with the farmers. Over time, the term CSA has come to incorporate a wide-range of models in which consumers purchase produce and other goods directly from farms. Potential benefits of participating in a CSA include knowing where your food is grown and who has handled it, consuming local seasonal produce, and reduced trips to the grocery store.

CSA fairs provide opportunity for farms to network with potential CSA customers. Events have been held around the country, in which farmers gather at a brewery, community center, or other locale and set up tables, pass out flyers about their farms, and explain to customers the type of operation and produce that they will have the upcoming season. By having an event in which multiple farms can be represented at one time, customers are able to find a CSA share that makes the most sense for them. For farmers, CSA fairs provide an opportunity to show consumers who they are, why they farm, and what they produce.

This year, in light of COVID-19, many in-person CSA Fairs were not able to happen. The country-wide

shutdown came at a crucial time for farmers, as it was the beginning of the main growing season in the United States. This is when CSA shares need to be sold in order for farmers to be able to get seeds in the ground and workers in the fields. Many in-person events have transitioned to online and CSA Fairs are no exception. The logistics of virtual CSA Fairs, however, are not uncomplicated. Organizers asked themselves questions about the ways in which customers could easily connect with farmers on a virtual platform, where interpersonal relationship building is not always straightforward.

In Kentucky, a quick transition to a virtual CSA fair was only possible because of pre-established partnerships among many different organizations around the state. The state's department of agriculture was able to put the marketing dollars into the online event that eventually attracted nearly 200,000 people to interact with the event on Facebook. Marketing specialists from the Organic Association of Kentucky (OAK) created 4 Facebook posts a day over a span of 2 weeks. These posts highlighted the different participating farms and their operations and featured photographs, and small descriptions provided by the farmers themselves. In addition, the event featured some farmers "live" on the page, where they were able to directly and in real-time interact with potential customers. Similarly, in Michigan, New York, and Wisconsin, a sudden pivot to a virtual event was necessary in order to connect farms with customers.

In Michigan, the fair featured two time slots where customers could show up in a Zoom meeting, from which they were sorted into "breakout rooms" that corresponded with their region of the state. Here, a representative of the



Facebook Cover Photo from the Find Your Farm Virtual CSA Fair Facebook event, FairShareCSA Coalition, Wisconsin.

region was available to answer any questions they had about the availability of CSAs and type of farms in their area. The FairShare CSA Coalition in Madison, Wisconsin held a virtual CSA fair that also featured breakout rooms on Zoom, but the farmers themselves were in the rooms, waiting to talk to potential customers. In contrast to in-person events, farmers explained that the virtual space allowed time for, "more quality conversations with people," said Carrie Sedlak, Executive Director of the FairShare CSA Coalition.

While each of these events was quickly organized in direct response to COVID-19, they provided each respective state with an informed outlook on how to operate CSA fairs in the future. Executive Director of OAK, Brooke Gentile, noted, "virtual space has its challenges, but it also has its benefits - more people are connecting with the content more easily." The notion of expanded geographies was particularly important to each of the organizers with whom we spoke. While in-person CSAs are strictly geographically bound, because customers only purchase CSA shares from farms close to them, events are limited in their capacity to display farms across the state. In Kentucky, past in-person events featured between 6-18 farms from a specific region, while their virtual fair was able to

showcase 55. In addition, farmers were not having to take valuable time out of their day to load their cars with marketing materials, travel to a centralized location, and spend several hours communicating about their products for potentially little reward. Megan Larmer, Director of the Regional Food Program at the Glynwood Center for Regional Food and Farming (NY), noted that their farmers had a 324% return on investment for the virtual CSA Fair, which is twice that of their usual in-person events.

Each organization explained the importance of creating opportunity for customers to connect directly with the farmers. Larmer stated, the best part of CSA Fairs is getting to talk to the actual farmer, so we needed to recreate this online." Farmers that participated were able to catch up on cooking, bookkeeping, and other household tasks during the fair while they were waiting to talk to potential customers. In Kentucky, Farmers were able to take as little time as they wanted to participate in the virtual CSA fair and participate in a call or send in a photograph and a small blurb describing their operation and, in some ways, received even more benefit than in-person events.

Looking forward in Kentucky, 51% of farmers that participated in the virtual fair this year said that they would participate in another virtual fair

or in-person fair, 36% would participate only if the event was virtual, and 10% said they would only participate if the event were in-person. This means that 87% of the farmers that participated in this year's virtual fair noted that they would do it again next year. The farms were able to gain a high amount of exposure for a very modest time exchange. In addition to the time benefit for farmers, organizers from each fair explained the



"Virtual Space has its challenges but it also has its benefits - more people are connecting with the content more easily."

Brooke Gentile, Executive Director of the Organic Association of Kentucky (OAK)

notable presence of "first time CSA customers" at their events. This means that the virtual events were attracting people that had never before participated in a CSA program. While some of this could be attributed to anxiety about disruptions in food supply chains, organizers also related it to the ease of the event. Showing up online can sometimes be much easier and less formal than attending an in-person event, particularly for people who are experiencing something for the first time. The virtual events were seemingly a "much more approachable way to learn about CSAs for many customers," noted Ashton Potter Wright of Bluegrass Farm to Table. By interacting with potential customers online, the virtual events were able to, "capture new audiences in ways that in-person events had not been able to do," asserted Garrett Ziegler from Michigan State University Extension.

With the experience of this year's fairs under their belt, organizers have all said that they will



Hudson Valley CSA Virtual Fair page,
<https://www.glynwood.org/events/calendar.html/event/2020/03/22/csa-fair-hudson>

likely move forward with another virtual or semi-virtual CSA fair next year, regardless of the presence or absence of restrictions on in-person events. By starting the promotion for the events much earlier and with a better understanding of how customers will engage with them, these organizations hope to create experiences for

customers and farms that are more engaging and informative, while still providing an opportunity for little cost to either party.

Building Better Beyond: *opportunities and considerations*

► Fundamentals of Success

Pre-established partnerships and relationship networks with avenues for information sharing contributed to the organizational ability to transition events and still make them marketable.

Dependable marketing and communication channels strengthened organizational ability to accurately and quickly communicate changes in the event, details about the new event, and recruit participants in the event.

► Engaging with local food, virtually

The virtual CSA Fairs, though challenging, were ultimately seen as a success by organizers. They were able to quickly pivot their events to a virtual space and, in turn, engage more people more easily. However, some organizers expressed concern for a "virtual fatigue" in relation to creating opportunities for consumers to engage with the local food system virtually.

► Considerations Moving Forward

- Organizers explained a significant influx of CSA subscribers for their partner farms this year. Will this flood of interest in CSAs and local food more broadly be sustained in a post-pandemic world?
- How can organizational networks and farms create opportunities for people to remain engaged with the local food system virtually?
- Though the events were able to reach large numbers of people online, what about the people the events were not able to reach?
- How will the local food system adjust if, post-pandemic, customer preferences return to how they were before?
- How can farms and organizations address issues of customer satisfaction if current social distancing guidelines remain into the next growing season?



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Thanks for reading!

For more information and resources on *Local and Regional Food Systems Response to COVID: Building Better Beyond*, visit: <https://lfscovid.localfoodeconomics.com/> where you can sign up for our project listserv, read other innovation briefs, and check out resources put forth by other sectors of the local and regional food system.

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For more information regarding virtual CSA Fairs and other CSA-related inquiries, visit: <https://www.csainnovationnetwork.org>

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