Online Ordering Options for Farm Sales during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic

Authored by Theresa J. Nartea, Associate Professor and Extension Marketing and Agribusiness Specialist, College of Agriculture, Virginia State University

Introduction

Traditional farm sales involving in-person purchasing of products at farm markets has changed dramatically with the advent of social distancing recommendations to reduce the potential spread of the COVID-19 virus. Online sales may provide new or enhanced income earning opportunities for farmers willing to adopt online ordering practices. Additionally, adopting online ordering practices may increase farm competitiveness in a post-COVID-19 marketplace through the continuance of customer service through the added convenience of online ordering. The purpose of this extension bulletin is to provide information for extension agents and their farm clientele on potential online ordering options for use in farm sales.

Online Ordering Options

Within this publication, several online options are discussed which farmers may consider. The online ordering options covered in this publication are as follows: 1) Communicating via emails; 2) Using Google Forms; 3) Developing a personal webpage with web store; and 4) Electronic commerce (E-commerce) subscription service platforms. The online ordering option selected by an individual depends on the level of technology skills needed, time availability, economic cost and ease of use by both farmer and customers.

Email Communication

Online orders may be taken through email communications. For example, an email message would be written to a customer that included a list of available products and their prices alongside a specified due date for placing orders. Some limitations of email ordering include inventory management based on incoming order volumes and the inability to accept payments online.

In order to promote a professional image, create a business only email account that includes your farm name in the email address, for example, yourfarmname@email.com. To set up a free email account, Google Mail is an option that includes features such as Google Forms which may be helpful in setting up a simple online ordering system. To sign up for Google Mail, go to https://www.google.com/gmail/about/

Using Google Forms

Google Forms is a free online form service for individuals who are signed up with Google Mail. Using Google Forms, farmers can create online order forms that they can link to their webpage, social media account and paste into email communications. Customers can complete the order form online and submit directly to the farmer in real-time. The completed order form data is synced to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet that is updated upon receipt of customer order form submission. Google Forms enables a farmer to set up an online ordering system quickly. Depending on order form complexity, farmers could create an order form and order database in less than one hour. Limitations of using Google Forms is the inability to accept payments online. To access Google Forms, you must already have a Google Mail account. The webpage for Google Forms is located at: https://www.google.com/forms/about/

Individual Webpage with Online Store

Utilizing a web design and hosting platform to develop an individual webpage offers flexibility to farm producers in the form and function of their webpage and online store. Several web design and hosting platforms require no webpage programming experience. Within Table 1., selected webpage design platforms that offer the option of including an online store are listed, varying online store pricing fees may apply.

Table 1. Selected examples of individual webpage design platforms with online store feature.

Platform	Pricing[a]	Features	Webpage
Ecwid	Webpage setup is free; Optional plans range from $15-$99 per month; Credit card processing costs may apply depending on selected card processor transaction charges.	Free version allows only 10 products. Ability to add online store to any website. SSL security certificate; Inventory and item orders are synchronized with Square, Clover, Alice Point of Sale (POS)	Homepage: https://www.ecwid.com/ and Pricing: https://www.ecwid.com/pricing
Square	Webpage setup is free; Optional plans range from $12-$72 per month; Credit card processing cost is 2.9% plus $0.30 transaction charge.	Ability to sell unlimited products for delivery or pickup; Inventory and item ordering synchronized with Square POS; Integrates with Instagram and Pinterest	Homepage: https://squareup.com/us/en/online-store and Pricing: https://squareup.com/us/en/online-store/plans
Weebly	Webpage setup is free; Optional plans range from $6 to $26 per month; Credit card processing costs may apply depending on selected card processor transaction charges.	Online shopping cart for order pickup; inventory management; unique templates; SSL security certificate; tax calculator	Homepage: https://www.weebly.com/online-store and Pricing: https://www.weebly.com/pricing
Wix	Webpage setup is free; Optional plans range from $23–$500 per month; Credit card processing costs may apply depending on selected card processor transaction charges.	Customizable webpage templates; shopping cart add-on optional plan; SSL security certificate; tax calculator	Homepage: https://www.wix.com/ecommerce/website and Pricing: https://www.wix.com/upgrade/website
Wordpress	Webpage setup is free; Optional plans range from $69-$99 per year. Credit card processing costs may apply depending on selected card processor transaction charges.	No limit to number of products; order management, calculates basic shipping & taxes; collect payments using PayPal Express, Square, Stripe	Homepage: https://wordpress.org/plugins/wp-easycart/ and Pricing: https://www.wpeasycart.com/wordpress-shopping-cart-pricing/

[a] Pricing at time of publication.

E-Commerce Subscription Service Platforms

Many E-commerce subscription services are available that offer online storefront and order management services. Using an E-commerce subscription service enables individual farmers or groups of farmers to set up an independent online store offering customers the ability to purchase items from different farm vendors by adding items into one shopping cart and checking out with one purchase event, for example, Lulu's Local Foods (Table 2). Alternatively, individual farmers can set up an independent storefront and sell alongside other farmers who are using the subscription service platform. Farm producers have a wide selection of E-commerce subscription platforms to choose from as indicated in Table 2, below. Prices and features vary and are subject to change.

Table 2. Selected examples of E-commerce subscription service platforms.

Platform	Pricing[a]	Features	Webpage
1000EcoFarms	Cost is 4.9% of sales or $24/month; Credit card processing is 2.9%+$0.30 per credit card transaction	Provides an online farm profile that includes product inventory and ability to process credit cards.	https://www.1000ecofarms.com/en/promo/seller
Barn2Door	Set up fees from $299–499 setup fee; additional $59–99 per month; Credit card processing is 2.9%+$0.30 per credit card transaction	Develop an online storefront with option to embed into an existing website. Ability to process credit cards.	https://www.barn2door.com
Cropolis	Sliding fee cost per month based on number of orders: Free up to 15 orders; $29 (16-50 orders); $59 (51-110 orders); $99 (111-210 orders); $139 (211-310 orders); Credit card processing is 2.9%+$0.30 per credit card transaction	Created for direct marketing farmers to sell online. Includes order forms, inventory tools, picking and packing lists, invoices. Cost is free up to 15 orders per month, but orders over 15 are an additional cost based on volume of orders.	https://cropolis.co
CSAWare	2% of costs from delivery sales, with a minimum of $100/month, only during delivery months; Credit card transaction fee not specified, but may apply	CSA management software platform to create shares with share customization, CSA management and distribution tools. A product of localharvest.org.	https://www.csaware.com
Eat from Farms	$9/month+$0.25–0.50/order; Credit card processing is 2.9%+$0.30 per credit card transaction	E-commerce storefront that includes a "Subvendor" option to support multi-farm sales	https://eatfromfarms.com
Food4All	Each credit card payment includes a fee expense: Customers will pay 95 cents+2.5% (capped at $9.95); Farmers will pay 3.4%+$0.30for each credit card order.	Ability to add online store to any website, such as Facebook. Mobile Point of Sale option for in person sales.	https://www.food4all.com

[a] Pricing at time of publication.

Table 2. Selected examples of E-commerce subscription service platforms, continued.

Platform	Pricing[a]	Features	Webpage
Farmers Web	Free option includes farm profile and inventory list; additional plan options from $75 per month; 3.5%+$0.30 per credit card transaction; Quickbooks integration for an additional $10 per month	Farm sales management software platform for online sales with order management tools	https://www.farmersweb.com
Farmigo	2% fee from delivery sales, with a minimum of $150/month, only during delivery months; Credit card transaction fee not specified, but may apply	Optimized smartphone appearance of online store and ease of ordering. Ability to customize orders; track customer payment and delivery history; printable order form to attach to orders prior to delivery	https://www.farmigo.com
GrazeCart	14-day free trial; Pricing based on number of orders per month, for example for 40 orders you will pay $124 per month; Credit card processing fees of 2.9%+$0.30 per credit card transaction	Online storefront to display product inventory and process sales. Includes website builder, order management tools.	https://grazecart.com
Harvie	$500 setup fee; 7% of sales; Credit card processing fees of 2.9%+$0.30 per credit card transaction	Platform for CSA management of member share orders and sales.	https://forfarmers.harvie.farm/#pricing
Local Food Marketplace	Set up fees from $499 to $999 with additional fees from $79-$149 per month based on selected optional features; Credit card transaction fee not specified, but may apply	CSA management platform for member share orders and sales.	https://home.localfoodmarketplace.com/ See pricing page for details: https://home.localfoodmarketplace.com/producer-pricing
Local Line	Free option does not include online store. Paid memberships from $20 to $95 per month with additional fees for optional features. Credit card transaction fee not specified, but may apply	Order management and sales platform customizable for individual farmers, farmers markets, or food hubs.	https://site.localline.ca

[a] Pricing at time of publication.

Table 2. Selected examples of E-commerce subscription service platforms, continued.

Platform	Pricing[a]	Features	Webpage
LocallyGrown.net	3% fee from sales; Website uses Stripe.com for credit card processing with fee of 2.9%+$0.30 per credit card transaction	Online farmers market ordering platform for individual or multiple vendors. Customers can order and pick up products at a scheduled location.	https://locallygrown.net
Lulus Local Foods	2% fee from sales, or a minimum of $10 per quarter; fees are negotiated for sales over $100,000	Online storefront displaying product inventory from individual and multiple vendors; PayPal and Stripe credit card payment processing; Includes order forms, inventory tools, picking and packing lists, invoices, labels. Inventory is entered once by vendor to be submitted to multiple hubs and farmers markets at the same time.	https://www.luluslocalfood.net/
Online Farmers Market	5% of sales or $35/month; Credit card transaction fee not specified, but may apply	Online storefront displaying product inventory sales processing, order management (packing and pick lists) and customer communication via reminders, notices, emails	https://onlinefarmmarkets.com

[a] Pricing at time of publication.

Disclaimer

This publication is for informational purposes only. Virginia Cooperative Extension does not endorse these products or firms and does not assert that this publication includes all available products or product features. The mention of a product or firm in text or figures does not constitute an endorsement by Virginia Cooperative Extension and does not imply approval to the exclusion of other suitable products or firms.

References

Errickson, L., W. Hlubik, P. Nitzsche, and R. VanVranken. 2020. "Getting Started with Online Farm Sales During Times of Social Distancing." Rutgers, *The State University of New Jersey Cooperative Extension Fact Sheet FS1319.* Retrieved from https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs1319/

Tucker, M. 2020. "Online Ordering Platforms for Farmers. "*State of Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets.* Retrieved from https://agriculture.vermont.gov/sites/agriculture/files/doc_library/Online%20Ordering%20Options%20for%20Farms.pdf

National Young Farmers Coalition. 2020. *"Farmer's Guide to Direct Sales Software Platforms."* Retrieved from https://www.youngfarmers.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Farmers-Guide-to-Direct-Sales-Software-Platforms.pdf

Additional Resources

Virginia Farmers Market Association. 2020. "Farmers Selling Online: Choosing a Platform Video Recording." Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-ojXWlM43g

Virginia Farmers Market Association. 2020. "Farmers Selling Online: Using Lulus Local Food Video Recording." Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rY9YiA2vLs

Virginia Farmers Market Association. 2020. "Farmers Selling Online: Using Local Line Video Recording." Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INfkDd5NILM