

Relaying Local Food

August 27, 2012

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Ronnie Crickenberger of Meadow Run Farm inspects his harvest for Relay Foods.



Hardy Indoe of Hardy Farms herds his flock of chickens.

I first met Arnie Katz

at a Food + Tech meet-up highlighting new food distribution models, particularly in the sphere of online grocery shopping. Arnie was there to discuss his company Relay Foods, based in Virginia, and its unique blend of conventional groceries and locally sourced meats, produce and specialty goods.



Brandon of Relay Foods packs up some fresh produce for delivery.



Morgan walks an order through the warehouse...



Customers can pick up their order or have it delivered to their home.

I was especially struck by Arnie's remarks about how the local food producers play such a major role in both the company's foundation and future goals, and the customers' positive reaction to the broad selection of food goods produced right in company's backyard. I

reached out to Arnie to learn more about his Relay Foods' local philosophy, and he enthusiastically agreed.

What prompted Relay Foods to create working relationships with local vendors?

Arnie Katz: When we founded Relay, we studied the failures of early businesses in the online grocery space and realized that building huge warehouses to stock large quantities of aging packaged food was neither cost-efficient nor appealing to customers. It quickly became clear that by partnering with local vendors we could implement our vision for an online grocery without hundreds of millions of investment dollars and, more importantly, we could provide the highest quality, freshest food to our customers, put dollars back in the local economy, and differentiate ourselves from traditional online grocers.

Was a local presence something you always intended to feature on your site, or was it a result of the growing awareness of shopping locally?

AK: From the very beginning, partnering with local vendors has been an integral part of our business model. The local farmers and producers who have been with Relay from day one allow us to serve customers the best, freshest food without the cost of buying and storing inventory ourselves. Instead of buying and storing lettuce from across the country, we are able to offer customers lettuce picked fresh the morning of delivery from a field just a few miles away.

We've been gratified to find that our customers—whether they're devoted local foodies or not—keep coming back thanks to the amazing quality and freshness of local foods. As this awareness and consumer demand has grown we have continued to expand our local offerings to ensure that if a consumer wants access a local option (regardless if it is produce, meat, seafood, baked goods), we can provide it to them at the highest quality possible.

What has been the most surprising thing to Relay Foods about working with local vendors?

AK: Their passion for what they do is unequalled. Many of our local vendors are unique food specialists, sometimes concentrating on one single product for their entire professional career and/or carrying forward the food trade their family has practiced for generations. This focus allows them to be incredibly specialized and knowledgeable, growing or producing something that is totally unequalled compared to industrially prepared foods; this applies to everything from heirloom tomatoes to grass-fed beef to homemade pasta. This level of quality never ceases to amaze.

As I mentioned above, we've found that even customers who start shopping Relay out of convenience will get hooked on local foods once they've tasted the difference.

How does 'food transparency' fit into your company's ethos and practices?

AK: We've found that most people, whether they're foodies or convenience shoppers or moms, want to know more about what they eat and they make shopping decisions based on this information. No more is a simplistic tag line, like "Mommy Approved," enough.

Two of the central aspects of Relay's mission are to educate customers about what they eat and to reduce barriers between producers and consumers—in other words, to make it easier for customers to know how a product is made, by whom, and using what growing or production philosophy. This is hugely challenging as the amount of data and information needed to provide this kind of information to the end consumer is immense (and sometimes can be overwhelming to customers who are not ready for the deluge). Relay offers product information on each product in a simple digestible format that people can use to make a decision (such as should I "go local" or not). This includes not only specific information on the product, certifications, growing techniques, etc. but also information (and a picture) on the nutritional benefits. There is a lot more we can and will do as this trend continues to become more value added to all customers.

Relay Foods has done a great job of featuring the local vendors on the site – what are the key messages about these people and companies you wanted to convey to the customers?

AK: People want a connection to the food they eat. They want to know not only what is in their food but also how it is made and, increasingly, who made it. Our key messages tend to focus on the skill and attention with which vendors grow or prepare their products and, more importantly, the passion behind this process.

We want our shoppers to feel as if they know their local producers intimately, just as they would if they did all their shopping at the local farmers market year-round (which for most of us is simply impossible). We want them to be aware that by using Relayfoods.com and eating local they are not only improving their lives by eating healthier, but directly improving somebody else's life in the community.

How has this local merchandising impacted your customers' shopping habits?

AK: Quite often, the barrier to "eating local" is not paying a few extra cents for exceptional food—it's the time lost making it to the farmer's market on Saturday morning or driving from bakery to pasta shop to natural foods store. We find that by providing our customers with local and regional options that are equally as convenient as the "conventional" options, we help them ease the transition to "going local." Over and over, we've found that even customers who begin using Relay as convenience shoppers, buying only conventional options from our grocery partners, will relatively quickly begin to

shift their buying patterns to purchase local free-range eggs, grass-fed beef, heirloom produce. Once a customer tastes the quality of these products, they're usually hooked!

Do you see shopping "local" or "organic" as a passing trend, or is this a more fundamental change in people's thinking about food?

AK: I grew up in Israel, where buying a fresh, local, delicious tomato was easier and cheaper than buying a can of tomato sauce. When I came to the U.S., I was surprised by the degree to which food processors over the past few decades have turned the natural cost model on its head, making highly processed foods much cheaper than unprocessed foods.

I actually see cheap processed food as a trend that has run its course over the past few decades, while for the majority of human history, "local" "organic" food has been the only food available. The growth of the mega-grocery store and consolidation in the food business has made access to these foods more restricted over the past few decades, but I think consumer awareness is reversing this model. Fundamentally, consumers want to eat food that tastes good, and I think we're increasingly re-awakening to the fact that local, fresh food tastes better than its industrial counterpart.

In what ways will these local relationships shape the future of Relay Foods?

AK: Relay Foods' business model is built around the idea that technology can bring people closer to the food they eat. We are constantly working to ensure that our customers are sourcing, eating and enjoying local foods. One such initiative, Relay Ready, is a ready-to-cook line of recipes and prepped local ingredients from top local restaurants. These Relay Ready meal kits make it easier for customers to eat gourmet meals with local ingredients and spark inspiration in their kitchens for their own cooking experiments.

We also are working hard to build more market opportunities for smaller local vendors. As we expand into new markets, we will ensure that we localize ourselves in each market but also build a regional market for small vendors in every market. This is very exciting for local vendors, as not only will they be able to ensure strong growth and increased brand recognition in their backyard, they will have regional market opportunities that may not have been available to them without a Relay partnership.

Relay Foods' commitment to local food producers is inspiring. They're not only introducing customers to a healthier, more sustainable idea of 'grocery shopping,' but also creating a deep investment with the area's farmers, ranchers, bakers and makers.

Photo Credit: Billy Hunt Photography

Are you hungry yet?

Our HandPicked Basket comes out on Fridays, with special offers and treats we might add. Have you signed up yet?

Enter your email address

*or cancel