
Starting the Conversation: **A Guide for Food Service Directors & Farmers**



These questions are a guide for an initial meeting between a Food Service Director (FSD) and a local farmer. Questions, from the buyer's perspective, reflect the key issues expressed by FSD's in connecting for direct purchases. Both the Farmer and the FSD should come together with curiosity and a willingness to listen, adapt and be creative. Start small, try something and grow from what you learn.

For Farmers to consider when getting started:

- **PRODUCT:** Know what you grow, how much you grow, when it is available, and how it can be packaged and/or processed for schools.
- **COST OF PRODUCTION:** Know how much it costs you to produce an item so you can agree on a fair and profitable price with schools.
- **FOOD SAFETY:** Review your food safety practices. Organizing your food safety practices into a document like a Food Safety Plan will help you explain what you do to food service directors.
- **LIABILITY INSURANCE:** Review and make copies of your liability insurance policies. In most cases, a school will request you to carry liability insurance coverage (at about \$1M). If you are selling to a school through a distributor, then your distributor may provide this coverage.
- **DELIVERY:** Many schools will require delivery to one or more locations, possibly on more than one day of the week. What is your capacity for delivery? Know what you can do, and what you can't. How can you work collaboratively with other farmers or distributors, or schools themselves, to make delivery work?
- **EDUCATION:** Are you interested in visiting the school cafeteria or classroom to share knowledge about the food you grow? If so, this may be a great benefit to the school. If you aren't interested or able to engage in educational activities or have students to your farm, can you partner with other local farmers to provide some sort of educational experience?

Conversation Starters for Farmers

1. What produce/meat/added value dairy do you purchase on a regular basis?
 - a. What items do you purchase for special events throughout the year?
 - b. What range of volume do you typically order these items in?
-

Tailor this question to match what your farm produces.

2. Do you have a preferred minimum order amount, volume and/or price? Eg. they need 300 lbs of carrots, If you could provide a portion of that, what would a minimum percentage be?
 - a. *Stating what your minimum order is allows efficiency on both ends for seller and buyer to know if a relationship is a good fit for either business. Matching supply and demand takes open communication up front.*
3. What unit(s) do you typically order in? What standardized packing units are you used to?
 - a. *Let the FSD know how you typically pack your product: bunches, pounds, pecks... They need to think in ½ cups servings to order an accurate volume.*
4. Do you require or to what degree do you want product sized and/or sorted?
5. What is your preferred method of communication: phone, fax, email, other?
 - a. What is the best time to communicate?
6. Describe your invoicing needs and payment system? What do I need to provide to set up a new Purchase Order (PO)?
 - a. *Be prepared to provide a W-9, liability insurance and list the farm as additionally insured on the Certificate.*
7. How often would you want to hear about product availability and pricing? What is the best way to share that information?

Conversation Starters for Food Service Directors

1. Can you share a little about your business values/philosophy and your farm?
 2. Are you interested in supplying products to schools? Do you already sell directly to schools or other institutions?
 3. What is your preferred method of communication, phone, fax, email, other?
 - a. How do you communicate if there is a delivery problem, or product quality is not what it should be etc.?
 4. Schools require invoicing. Do you have a system to send an invoice? It takes our district _____ weeks to process payment. Can the invoice be itemized?
 5. What do you grow well that you could scale up? What do you grow efficiently?
-

-
6. How do you come up with the cost per unit? Do you have a price and/or availability sheet?
 7. How far in advance can you tell me what product you will have and when it will be available?
 - a. How much lead time do you need for my orders?
 8. Can you describe your pack style: box size, weight, volume fill vs. tray pack etc?
 - a. What bins or boxes to deliver in. Do they need to be returned?
 9. Can you describe your wash and pack process? How do you handle different products? Eg. Tomatoes, peppers, lettuce, or kale?
 - i. How do you hold different fruits and vegetables?
 10. On average, how much time between harvest and delivery?
 - a. *This question is important when utilizing [geographic preference language](#).*
 11. Let's talk about delivery. (Note – be clear on what you need. Be open to compromise. Eg. If you need product delivered to several schools, maybe you can work to minimize that.) Do you have a minimum order amount?
 12. Would you be willing to consider growing specifically to sell to our district?
 13. What quality control (food safety processes) do you have on your farm? Can you share any classes or food safety trainings you have done? Do you have a standard operating procedure (SOP) to train employees on best practices?
 14. Are you open and able to do farm tours for students and/or staff?

What Schools Generally Require?

- Insurance- What types/level of insurance- how does that work
- Registering as a vendor with a district? Some districts might require this, also based on levels of purchasing. What do schools require?
- Food Safety literacy at least
- Responsive and responsible communication
- They DO NOT require rock bottom prices.

What Schools DON'T Necessarily Require?

- Complex bids and Contracts
 - Food Safety Certifications
 - Large Volumes
 - Frequent Deliveries
-