

# GROWING ONLINE PRESENCE FOR SMALL FARMS

Report on an OFN Canada Project Funded by  
the Grassroots Growth Program



**OPEN FOOD**  
NETWORK  
CANADA

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge the funding support provided for this project by Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs' Grassroots Growth Program.



Ministry of  
Agriculture, Food &  
Rural Affairs

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# OVERVIEW

## PROJECT SUMMARY

This report shares outcomes and recommendations from a project that Open Food Network Canada recently delivered to help small farms and local producers in Ontario enhance their online presence. With funding support from the Ontario Ministry of Food and Rural Affairs' Grassroots Growth Program, we aimed to help farmers implement digital marketing strategies and ecommerce best practices that would increase trust and engagement with consumers and stimulate business growth.

Our project focused on the following activities:

1. Creating a set of digital marketing resources, tools and content templates that we shared with a broad cohort of Ontario farms
2. Offering farms one-to-one guidance on the effective implementation of a digital marketing strategy
3. Enhancing farms' use of our ecommerce platform through estore 'tune-ups' focused on correcting the configuration of estores and optimizing the use of promotional elements
4. The creation of online multi-vendor marketplaces, providing consumers with one-stop shopping access to a range of products from multiple local farms.

## OUTCOMES

In assessing project outcomes, we observed that the biggest source of growth for individual farms and producers came as a result of selling products through one or more multi-vendor hubs or online marketplaces. Analysis of OFN platform sales data revealed the following key trends:

1. Farms selling in a multi-vendor marketplace did better than farms selling direct to consumers.
2. Farmers who were able to leverage established multi-vendor marketplaces benefited from immediate access to the marketplace's existing customer base and distribution network.
3. Farms and marketplaces selling wholesale did better than those selling direct to consumers.
4. Marketplaces focused on non-food farm products (such as cut flowers) did better than those selling food products.



While our initial survey of farmers indicated a strong interest in one-to-one digital marketing support, uptake for this service was considerably slower than expected. No-shows and late cancellations were relatively frequent, drawing attention to what farms frequently cited as their biggest obstacle to digital marketing: lack of time. Although there was less demand for one-to-one support than survey responses led us to anticipate, farms that participated were grateful for the service. Participants were able to reach a number of key individual marketing goals, such as setting up a Facebook page, running a holiday marketing campaign, and posting on a regular schedule. Participating farms also indicated high satisfaction with the help provided.

## NEXT STEPS

Based on the outcomes and lessons learned from this project, we suggest understanding digital marketing strategy for small farms within a broader context of market development. Accounting for the limited time that most small farms are able to spend on content creation, and building on this project's most successful activities, we recommend a more deliberate focus on the development of co-selling initiatives and multi-vendor marketplaces for local food and farming products. By developing further capacity in the areas of food hub management and short supply chain coordination, local food organisations can help farms to outsource marketing and market development work to trusted third parties.

With this objective in mind, there are a number of key areas in which organisations can help in the development of a marketing and market development strategy:

- Member associations and food policy groups can play an important role in connecting farms with hub managers and supply chain coordinators.
- Advocacy and policy groups can support the creation of short supply chains by working with member associations to develop networks and training resources that support the growth of a new generation of short supply chain coordinators and hub managers.
- Government funding support can play an essential role in establishing new hubs, providing subsidized income for hub managers while they scale the enterprise to the point that they become self-sustaining.

At Open Food Network Canada, we intend to use this project as an entry point to developing and testing best practices for online food hubs and multi-vendor marketplaces, and to establish market development strategies that help farms outsource this work to capable community partners.



# INTRODUCTION

Open Food Network (OFN) Canada is a non-profit software provider dedicated to building food and farming systems that are fair, local, and transparent. Our open source ecommerce platform supports local food systems by making it easier to create and coordinate community food enterprises and online food and farming marketplaces.

In addition to providing software solutions built for local food systems, Open Food Network Canada also collaborates with academic research institutions to conduct research, and runs community development initiatives in partnership with local entrepreneurs and grassroots change-makers.

This report details the results of a recent project that OFN Canada delivered with funding support from the Ontario Ministry of Food and Rural Affairs' Grassroots Growth Program. The Grassroots Growth Program provides short-term funding to support the growth of Ontario's agri-food sector.

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In line with the mandate of this program, our goals were to help small farms and local producers:

- Increase public trust and engagement by implementing digital marketing strategies that help 'close the gap' between consumer and producer
- Foster and stimulate growth through their online presence.

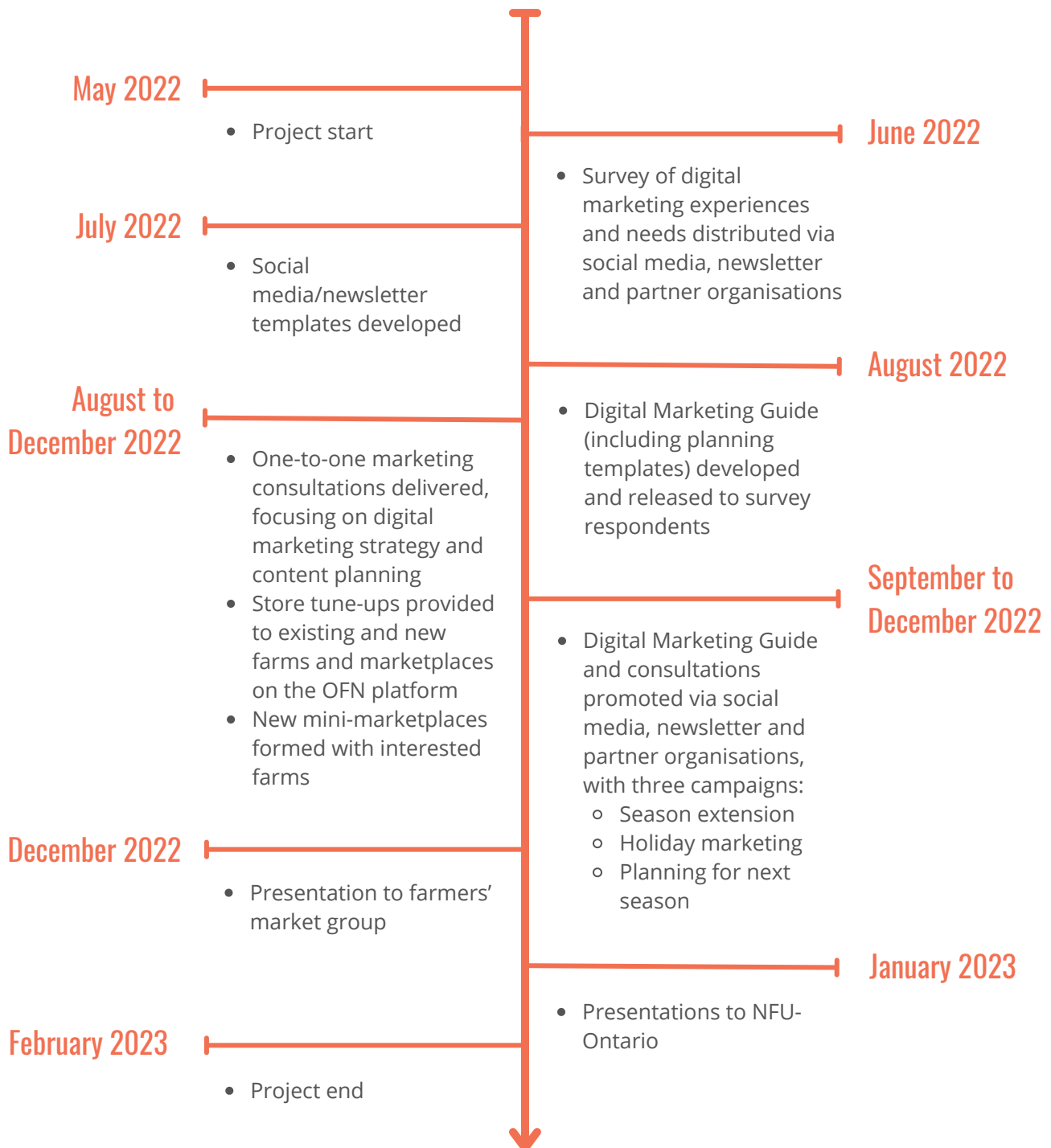
The project we designed addressed these goals through four main activities:

1. We created a set of digital marketing resources, tools and content templates that we shared with a broad cohort of Ontario farms.
2. We offered farms one-to-one guidance on the effective use of digital marketing strategies.
3. We worked directly with Ontario farms to enhance their use of the OFN ecommerce platform.
4. We built online multi-vendor marketplaces, providing consumers with one-stop shopping access to a range of products from multiple local farms.



All of these activities focused on using online tools and marketing strategies to reach more customers and build authentic connections with local consumers.

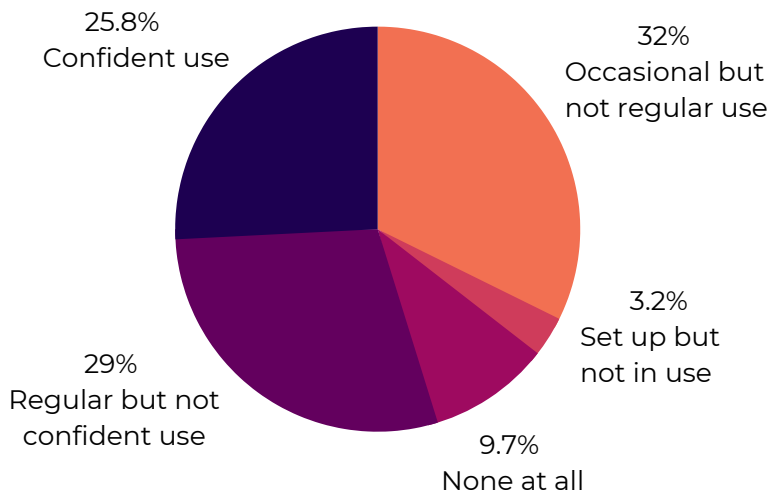
# PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND RESULTS





# FARM SURVEY

In order to better understand farmers' digital marketing experiences and needs, we began this project with a short survey, distributed through our newsletter, social media, and several large partner organisations. The results revealed a range of comfort levels with digital marketing and a variety of obstacles to its implementation.

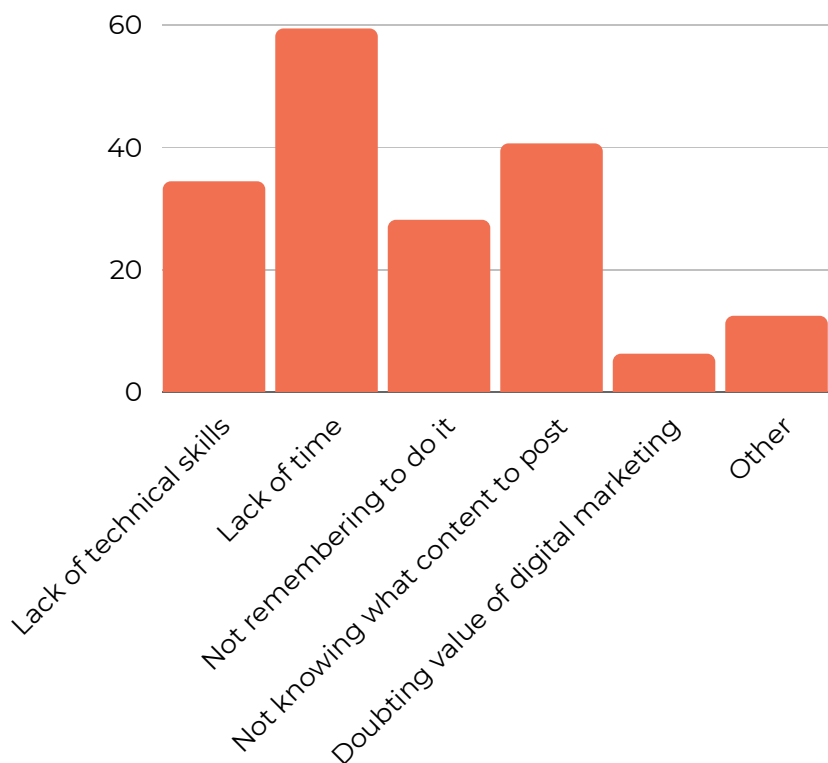


## USE AND COMFORT LEVEL WITH DIGITAL MARKETING

Respondents reported a range of comfort levels with digital marketing channels, with the majority saying they use these channels 'occasionally' or 'regularly' but not with confidence.

## OBSTACLES TO DIGITAL MARKETING

Respondents indicated a number of obstacles interfere with their use of digital marketing tools, with lack of time, knowledge and technical skills all being reported by over one third of respondents.



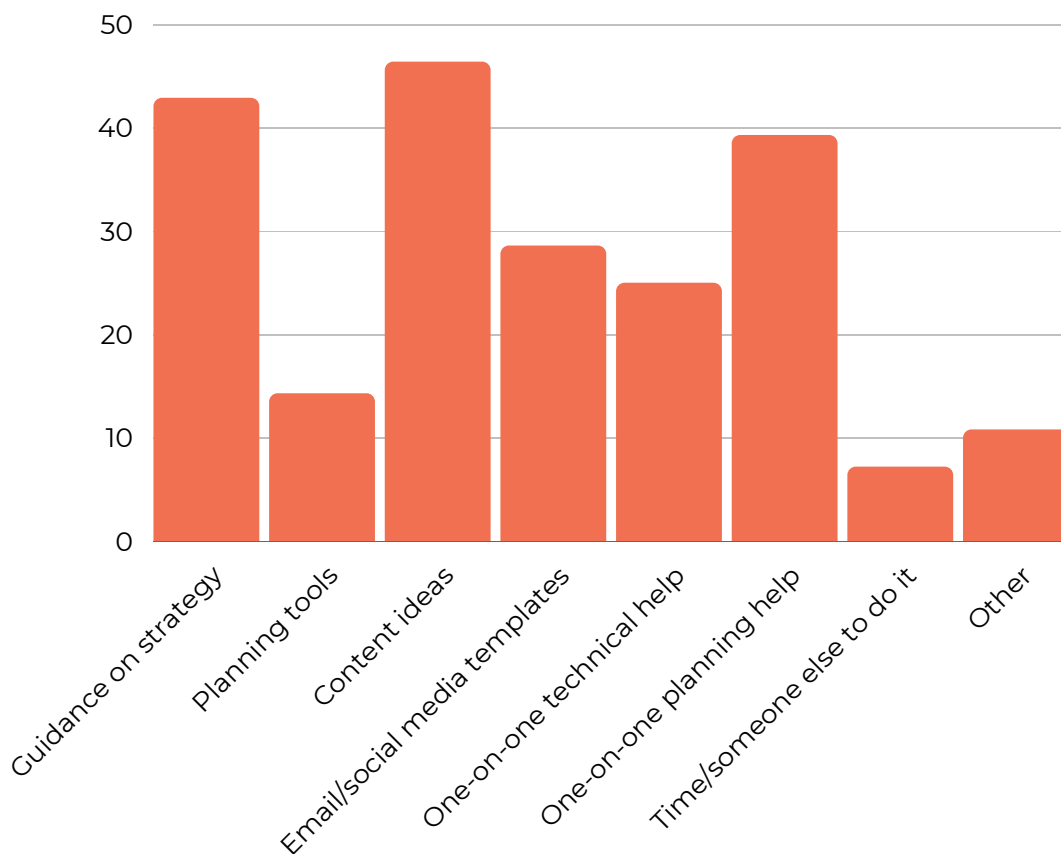


74% OF FARMERS WANT TO IMPROVE CONTENT AND ENGAGEMENT



## DIGITAL MARKETING SUPPORTS REQUESTED

When asked about next steps for digital marketing, 74% indicated they want to improve content and engagement. Marketing guidance, content ideas, and one-to-one help were chosen as the most useful services to reach these next steps, with smaller numbers requesting templates, planning tools and technical assistance.



# DIGITAL MARKETING RESOURCES

Based on the survey feedback, we developed a [set of digital marketing resources](#) that covered a range of needs, while emphasizing planning and strategy.

## DIGITAL MARKETING GUIDE

An introduction to digital marketing planning and content development, tailored to the opportunities and challenges of marketing small farms.

## DIGITAL MARKETING CALENDAR

A yearly and monthly planning calendar, with blank and sample pages.

## NEWSLETTER AND SOCIAL MEDIA TEMPLATES

A seasonal set of newsletter templates for use in Mailchimp, as well Facebook and Instagram templates for use in Canva.

## DIGITAL MARKETING AUDIT

A checklist of best practices to help farmers assess strengths and next steps in their marketing.

The image shows two overlapping digital marketing resource templates. The top one is a 'DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGY TEMPLATE' with sections for 'OUR MARKETING GOALS' and 'OUR CUSTOMERS'. The bottom one is a 'Yearly Overview' calendar for 2022, showing monthly newsletters, social media themes, and holidays.

Yearly Overview			
	Newsletters	Social Media Themes	Holidays + Important Dates
June	Summer Highlights [June/early July]	End of school BBQ season	National Farm Workers Day - June 9, 2022 Father's Day - Jun 19, 2022 First Day of Summer - Jun 21, 2022
July		Summer on the farm Summer fun - community activities, recipes	Canada Day - Jul 1, 2022 Get to Know Your Customers Day - Jul 20, 2022 Food Day Canada - Jul 30, 2022
August		Summer on the farm Summer fun - community activities, recipes	Civic Holiday (name varies by province) - Aug 1, 2022 National Farmers Market Week - Aug 7 - 13, 2022 World Honey Bee Day - Aug 20, 2022 Eat Outside Day - Aug 31, 2022
September	Welcome Autumn [late September]	Back to school + recipes Transition to Fall	Labour Day - Sep 5, 2022 First Day of Fall - Sep 22, 2022 National Day of Truth and Reconciliation - Sep 30, 2022
October		Giving thanks	Thanksgiving - Oct 10, 2022

We distributed this digital marketing pack directly to respondents of the survey, as well as making it available for download to farms across Ontario. The resources were promoted multiple times through our newsletter, social media, and via partner organisations. We first shared these resources in early Fall with a focus on season extension and holiday marketing, and then again in early Winter with a focus on planning for the upcoming season.



# CONSULTATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

Along with developing and distributing resources, we also provided one-to-one digital marketing support and consultations. These 40-minute sessions, run over Zoom with our Marketing and Communications Coordinator, were tailored to the skill level and marketing needs of each farmer, and focused on implementing the strategies and tools included in our digital marketing resources. After each session, the Coordinator provided farms with a short written plan and/or completed templates, as well as the opportunity for follow up questions.

Finally, in an effort to engage farmers in another way, we also conducted presentations on digital marketing for two interested groups: one for a meeting of farmers' market vendors, and another to members of the National Farmers Union - Ontario.

# ECOMMERCE OPTIMIZATIONS

In addition to offering resources and consultations to farms across Ontario, we also made use of Grassroots Growth Program funding support to provide enhanced services to existing users of the OFN Canada ecommerce platform.

## ESTORE TUNE-UPS

We began by conducting an audit of Ontario farms on the platform, identifying clients that would benefit from an estore 'tune-up' with our support team. Tune-ups focused on helping farms make better use of our digital tools by correcting the configuration of estores and optimizing the use of promotional elements. This included providing services such as:

- Inputting unit and unit type for products so they display clearly in the shopfront
- Adding links to social media pages
- Ensuring that farms had compelling descriptions and relevant information in their 'About' sections
- Assisting in the enhancement of product listings, including detailed product descriptions and quality images to help sell products
- Guiding farms in the best use of tagging tools to identify certifications/labels and farming practices, to increase transparency and consumer trust.



## Radishes - Green Luobo

from Knechtel, Brenda & Maynard

organic (certified)

local

GMO-Free

Gluten Free

Vegan

A traditional 'winter' variety of radish with quite long, tapering roots of carmine skin and pure white, crisp pungent flesh. Great in salads

2kg

\$53.00

\$26.50 / kg

5kg

\$131.50

\$26.30 / kg

PRODUCT TAGGING

DESCRIPTIVE PRODUCT LISTING

CLEAR UNIT TYPES AND PRICING

HIGH QUALITY PHOTO



## MULTI-VENDOR HUBS

In addition to improving individual farm storefronts and profiles, we assisted businesses in linking up to join or form multi-vendor 'mini-marketplaces.' These marketplaces, or hubs, aggregate, sell, and distribute products from multiple farms and producers through a single storefront. In this co-selling arrangement, a market coordinator manages the estore, suppliers maintain control of their own inventory and pricing, and customers search for and purchase items in one place.



Multiple farms and producers supply products to the hub



The hub aggregates products and sells through a single online storefront



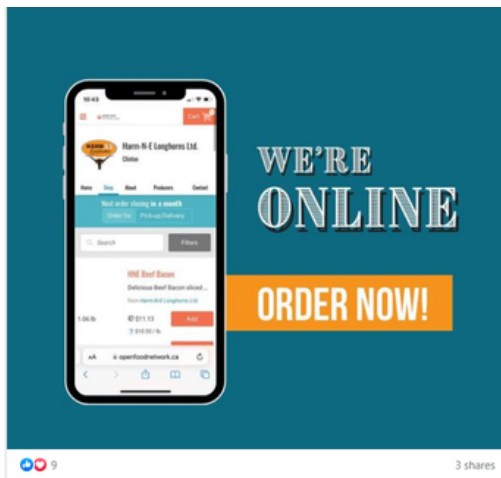
Customers can purchase in one place and easily trace each product to its source



# RESULTS

By the end of the project, there were 127 downloads of our digital marketing pack. It continues to be available on our website as a lasting resource for farmers and producers.

In total our Marketing and Communications Coordinator worked one-to-one with a dozen different farms and small producers. Although survey results indicated a strong interest in one-to-one consultations, the uptake for this service was less than expected, likely due to the time commitment involved. No-shows and late cancellations were relatively frequent, drawing attention again to what was identified in our survey as the biggest obstacle to digital marketing: lack of time.



Despite experiencing less demand than survey responses led us to anticipate, we did see the value of direct assistance for those motivated to use this service. Participants were able to reach a number of individual goals, such as setting up a Facebook page, running a holiday marketing campaign, and posting on a regular schedule. They also indicated high satisfaction with the help provided. In particular, several participants expressed that this personalized coaching brought them a feeling of confidence and focus moving forward.

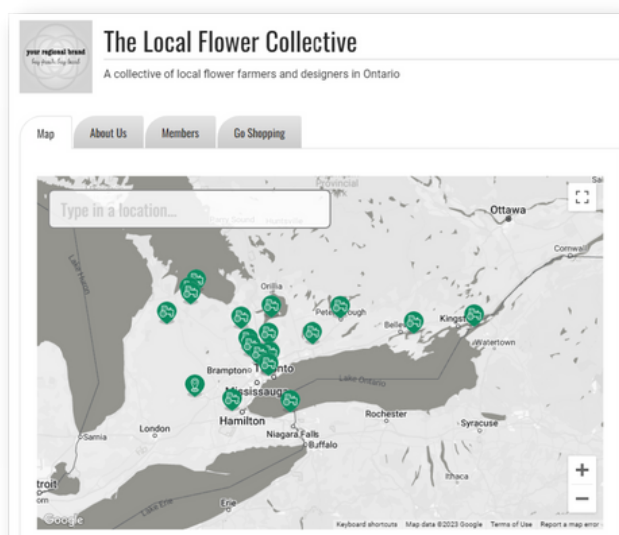
“Thank you very much for these resources and for your time and advice yesterday. It was very helpful and has given me renewed hope for our marketing efforts!” ~ Farmer

“The content calendar looks great. I am already brainstorming [ideas]” ~ Farmer



In contrast to the consultations, interest in shop tune-ups on our platform was greater than expected. We completed 'tune-ups' for 230 enterprises selling products to 7 pre-existing and 5 new multivendor storefronts (mini-marketplaces). This resulted in a number of positive outcomes:

- 7 new online stores selling their own products
- 5 new multi-vendor marketplaces created
- 35 farms linking to new marketplaces/hubs
- 44% increase in sales on the OFN platform among the 230 participants, compared to the same time period in the previous year



## OVERALL, SALES DATA ON OUR PLATFORM REVEALED SEVERAL PATTERNS:

- 1 Farms selling in a marketplace did better than farms selling direct to consumers.
- 2 Farmers who were able to leverage existing multi-vendor marketplaces benefited from immediate access to the marketplace's customer base and distribution network.
- 3 Farms and marketplaces selling wholesale did better than those selling direct to consumers.
- 4 Marketplaces focused on non-food farm products (such as cut flowers) did better than those selling food products.

This average increase in sales masks significant diversity. Non-food hubs (primarily selling wholesale) experienced a 142% increase in sales from July - Dec 2022, compared with the same period in 2021. A group of three wholesale cut flower hubs experienced significant sales increases, likely boosted by supply chain disruptions during (and after) COVID. By comparison, for the same period, farms and marketplaces selling food products to consumers experienced a 10% decline in sales, likely affected by the return of consumers to in-person grocery shopping.





# RECOMMENDATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

This project has been a valuable learning opportunity for our team and has led to important discussion around how similar initiatives could be run in the future. For organisations trying to address these same needs, the following recommendations may help to maximize their success.

## FACILITATE CO-SELLING OPPORTUNITIES

We observed that the biggest source of growth for individual farms and producers was in selling through one or more multi-vendor hubs or marketplaces. For farmers who have little time to commit to marketing and do not have the budget to hire a marketing assistant, selling through established online marketplaces can be a very efficient approach to establishing new online sales channels. Selling through hubs that have strong 'source identification' practices can also be an effective way for a new cohort of consumers to discover a farm. An important qualification is that farms are eager to *join* hubs, especially when an existing distribution system can be used to get the product from the farm to the hub, but are less likely to *set up* co-selling initiatives themselves.

For OFN Canada and other organisations, focusing on the coordination of co-selling opportunities not only builds on some of the proven successes that we identified in this project, but also addresses key challenges that were reported by many farms, including lack of time and digital marketing skills gaps.

## SUPPORT CAPACITY AND BEST PRACTICES FOR MULTI-VENDOR HUBS

Our experiences suggest certain practices and business models that make multi-vendor hubs more likely to succeed. These include:

- Offering key categories (dairy, meat, fruits, vegetables, prepared items)
- Starting small, but having a roadmap to a comprehensive [nutritious basket](#) (30 suppliers)
- Polling consumers before launch to determine which suppliers and products are priorities
- Sourcing from small wholesalers
- Including non-food items (e.g., cut flowers)
- Starting by sourcing products from local farms that already run delivery routes into the area, and then scaling from there.





## ENCOURAGE WHOLESALE OPPORTUNITIES FOR FARMS THROUGH ECOMMERCE

One of the most successful elements of this project was the establishment of wholesale markets for cut flower farmers. An obvious advantage of this mode of sales vs retail sales is that the bulk nature of wholesale results in larger orders with fewer customers. This success points to a new area of opportunity for OFN, as a conduit for wholesale hubs servicing restaurants, schools, etc., and also speaks to an emerging opportunity for small farmers in Ontario.

## ADDRESS DIGITAL MARKETING IN CONJUNCTION WITH LARGER MARKETING PLANS AND BUSINESS MODELS

Farmers who are new to online marketing may set up an estore or a social media profile believing customers will simply find them: “build it and they will come.” For these farmers, digital marketing ‘tips’ may be useful, but they will only create real growth opportunities if they support a clearly defined market development strategy. Online sales are likely to be one of a number of different sales channels (others may include in-person farmers markets, farmgate sales, restaurants, wholesale, etc.). Likewise, digital marketing should be just one of many elements in attracting and retaining customers. Depending on the kind of sales channels that a farm wants to establish (e.g., CSA, online multi-vendor hub), different marketing strategies are needed, and certain business models require more digital marketing support than others.

DIGITAL MARKETING WILL ONLY CREATE REAL GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES IF IT SUPPORTS A CLEARLY DEFINED MARKET DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

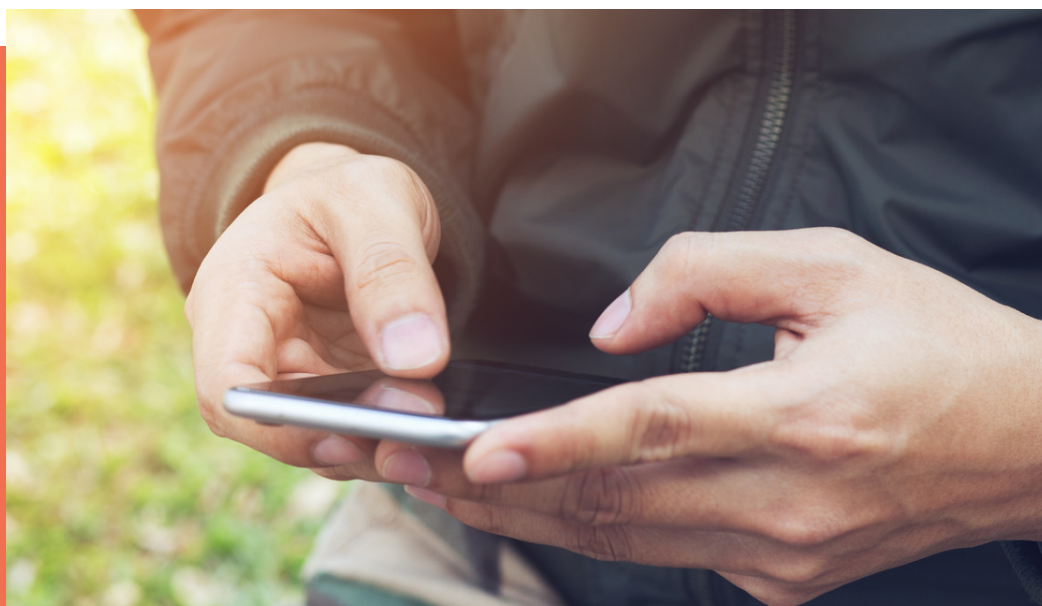


## RECOGNIZE FARMERS' OBSTACLES AND LIMITATIONS

As we have noted, it is important that farmers make a realistic assessment of the time and resources they are able to commit to digital marketing. Programming from organisations such as OFN Canada needs to keep this same assessment in mind. In many cases, this means working with farmers and producers who may feel overwhelmed by the number and variety of tasks that they have to complete.

Tailoring approaches with this in mind could include:

- Providing alternatives like co-selling opportunities, that effectively 'outsource' marketing and content creation to a trusted third party.
- Beginning with discrete, easy to implement steps. The store tune-ups we offered had a higher than expected interest in part for this reason; participants in the marketing consultations also responded best to feedback that offered them a specific sequence of steps to follow.
- Planning project timelines around the seasonal nature of farming. We noted that the start time of our project in early Summer was an obstacle to engagement; participation may be more likely in the Winter months when work loads are generally lower and farmers are looking ahead to the upcoming season.



## OFFER TRAINING AND GUIDANCE EARLY IN THE TRANSITION TO ONLINE SALES

As noted, we observed that many farms and producers set up storefronts without a marketing plan in place and often without knowing best practices for selling in an ecommerce environment. For platforms like OFN, as well as organisations that work with farmers just starting out, there is an opportunity to provide education and feedback immediately, helping to set businesses on the right path from the beginning.



# WHAT'S NEXT?

The urgent transition to online sales brought on by the pandemic has now subsided, but support for selling online—long-term and effectively—is still very much a need for small farms and producers. As this project demonstrates, we may achieve the greatest gains for the local food system overall by developing digital marketing strategies that extend their focus beyond individual farmers operating independent online estores, toward training and mentorship of local food systems coordinators, leaders, and volunteers. The benefits of co-selling through multi-vendor marketplaces and wholesale stores are clear, but many farms do not have the time or skills to initiate and maintain these hubs themselves.

Taking such an approach requires understanding digital marketing in the broader context of market development strategies in the local food sector. There are a number of ways organisations can contribute to this new direction of support:

- Member associations and food policy groups can play an important role in connecting farms with hub managers and supply chain coordinators.
- Advocacy and policy groups could support this process by working with member associations to develop networks and training resources that support the growth of a new generation of short supply chain coordinators and hub managers.
- Government funding support could play an essential role in establishing new hubs, providing subsidized income for a hub manager until the hub can generate enough revenue to become self-sustaining.

**WE MAY ACHIEVE THE GREATEST GAINS FOR THE LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM OVERALL BY EXTENDING THE FOCUS BEYOND INDIVIDUAL FARMERS TOWARD TRAINING AND MENTORING SHORT SUPPLY CHAIN COORDINATORS, LEADERS, AND VOLUNTEERS**

For Open Food Network Canada, the next steps will be to use our learnings from this project and our expertise in local food systems to research best practices for starting and running hubs, and beyond that, work to establish new hubs following this model.

