

Alaska Grown Brand Discussions: Producers, Farmers, Growers



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Craciun Research was contacted by Solstice Advertising (agency) on behalf of its client the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to support recent efforts by the agency and DNR with desired research services. Initial meeting discussions were shared with Jean Craciun, Research Director, Craciun Research by Lincoln Garrick, President of Solstice Advertising. Specifically, at the client kick-off meeting it was explained that specialty crop producers do not necessarily market individually, and that many recently funded state efforts are likely to be credited with increased sales. However, it would be DNR's preference that, producers/farmers/growers also market their products individually. It was desired to conduct research to ascertain what the target market understands AK Grown to be, what farmers' understanding of the market is, and how the program can be used to better assist Producers, Farmers, Growers (producers).

The primary goal of the research was to determine what AK Grown means to consumers and how they should be marketing to these targeted audiences. A secondary goal expressed was to understand what farmers could do to add value?

Research Design

The qualitative research project design was to conduct two Focus Groups with selected audiences. The first group was with Producers/Farmers/Growers to gage initial sentiment and understanding of the current market situation. Issues explored were: What is the value of the Ak Grown; how and why do they use it as a market tool; who do they see as their core market; what is the best role for the Ak Grown program; effectiveness of program; and what could help improve the program for all involved. This first group was conduct April 18, at the Craciun Research Focus Group Facility. Eight members of the target audience participated; some present in the room and some on the telephone. A lively discussion was held with these key players and this report is the result of that first session.

A second Focus Group session is scheduled to be conducted in May with target consumers.

Jean Craciun, Research Director, collaborated with the client's representatives on development of the screener and the focus group discussion guide to ensure a successful project.

Ms. Craciun moderated these focus groups; she holds a Master's degree in Sociology from Cleveland State University and has completed course work on a doctoral degree in Human Resources Education from Boston University. She currently serves on the national board for Qualitative Research Consultants Association (QRCA).

Dr. Tracy Dudley assisted Jean Craciun and served as the Assistant Moderator for this qualitative study. She has extensive advertising, marketing, and qualitative research experience.

Focus Group Research Background

Focus group research, by design, provides quality controls on data collection in that participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other, which weed out false or extreme views. The group dynamics typically contribute to focusing on the most important topics and issues being discussed. Trained qualitative analysts can assess the extent to which there is a relatively consistent, shared view of the discussion topics among the participants.¹

The focus group interview is an information gathering process that seeks to discover the perceptions, feelings, and experiences of the selected participants about a particular topic. Focus groups help to determine the ways that participants structure their world around the particular topic. Focus group participants respond to the questions in their own words and trained observers can learn much from the group interview. The unit of analysis for this type of research is “the group” and not the individual. From the focus group interview we learn how people view the particular topic or experience, hear their terminology and capture the complexities of the individual experiences in a group interview environment.²

A focus group study is a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment. A trained professional moderator conducts each group with six to eight people. The discussions are relaxed, and often participants enjoy sharing their ideas and perceptions. The group discussion is conducted several times with carefully selected participants so the researcher can identify trends and patterns.³

Notes to Readers

The participants’ verbatim comments are indented rather than set off in quotation marks. Brackets set off the analyst’s explanations of some of the participants’ comments.

¹ Patton, Michael Quinn, *How to Use Qualitative Methods in Evaluation*, Sage Publications, November 1987.

² Gredler, Margaret E., *Program Evaluation*, Prentice Hall, September 1995.

³ Krueger, Richard A., Casey, Mary Anne, *Focus Groups 3rd Edition - A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, Sage Publication, Inc. 2000.

A. Awareness of the brand is crucial

Those 'in the know' intentionally buy Alaska Grown

According to several respondents, consumers who realize that there are products grown here in Alaska do want to support local producers. First of all, it is good for the economy.

My customers absolutely love it. I still have a market going today in Anchorage and will sell out. I'm about done because I've sold everything I grew.

People are very loyal to Alaskan Grown. We hear all the time we can't wait until your stuff is on the shelves. They think the quality is better and they want to support Alaskan Grown.

Distinct difference in quality – key selling point

Second, those who have tried Alaska Grown products know there is a distinct difference in quality compared to other stuff that has to be shipped in. Overall, respondents agree quality and taste diminish with the passage of time and with packaging.

How significant is the Alaskan Grown? I do think that it's vital as far as people are. I think consumers are really coming to look for it and look at it as a step above.

Many respondents say the trick is to make sure consumers realize the difference in quality. Numerous consumers are not aware that buying local not only helps the economy, but also helps them because they get a much better product.

There are people that will only buy Alaskan Grown carrots period. Our potatoes are significantly different than outside in that they are sweeter because we grow and store at cooler temperatures. That takes some education; but once converted, they like them.

Respondents say the key is to get the consumer to taste the difference between local fresh produce and produce that has been shipped in, and the superior quality will be obvious. The magnitude of the superior quality must be obvious in order to overcome the tendency for consumers to lean toward what is most convenient.

If we could convince people... I don't know if you have ever eaten that bagged lettuce, but it's hard to even recognize it as lettuce. If people would purchase fresh, it's much better tasting.

One of the biggest things I think we, as Alaskan Grown producers, have is the problem of convenience. People every week buy the packaged chopped lettuce mixes on sale at the different stores. People buy that because it's convenient; all they have to do is throw it in a bowl and add their dressing. The same can be said about frozen French fries and tater tots or frozen carrots.

No preference a sign of naivety

It is discouraging to respondents that some consumers still do not realize that there are Alaskan Grown products available, nor why they should be buying those over Outside products. As such, they do not show a preference when they shop and typically just buy whatever they see.

Consumers that use a lot of Alaskan Grown are sold on Alaskan Grown. I just don't think that all of Alaskan consumers use Alaskan Grown. Obviously we are selling side by side. There are Alaskan Grown potatoes and Idaho potatoes. Both are selling when people have a choice. There are some people that aren't converted to Alaskan Grown. If that weren't true, all our Alaskan Grown potatoes should have been bought months ago.

Unless the consumer is specifically educated well enough to know something about Alaskan Grown, they are not looking for it. They don't care whether it says Idaho, Alaska or Hawaii. They just grab a bag of potatoes that says five pounds. That's it, they are done.

B. Limited window of availability

The fact that Alaska Grown produce is only available a limited time of the year significantly contributes to the overall lack of awareness of its existence. Respondents do not have the opportunity to spread the word – via product on the shelves – year round.

One Alaska's produce is quite seasonal, so when you talk about Eat Alaska (exclusive of wild game or fish), you are talking about something that is only available for short periods of time, generally during the summer. Kale is an exception.

Most people know that you can't depend on having Alaskan Grown available 12 months out of the year.

Slow start every season due to need for reminding

Producers indicate a recurring challenge each summer in getting the word out that Alaska Grown produce is available. This is compounded by greater simplicity associated with prepackaged produce. However, after the slow start, consumers become accustomed to the higher quality product and buy it when they can. Then, they are left wanting more when the season ends and Alaskan Grown produce is gone again for months.

Those that have been here for a while understand that it is seasonal. I know that I have to work hard to get customers to come to my market in early July. I have to advertise to get them to come. By late July, they get the picture, and they are coming. Then they are brokenhearted by late September.

When I came to the market the first of July with lettuce last year, it took about three weeks before I would sell out of lettuce...which surprised me. Someone said it's because people are used to buying a bag cut up already. It took a few weeks for them to realize fresh really tastes better. Then, I couldn't have enough lettuce.

They just weren't ready (for fresh) when they came to buy lettuce. It was just kind of strange to me when someone asked for bagged lettuce.

Additionally, because of ongoing flux in the composition of the population, there is an ever-changing base of consumers that need re-education almost continuously.

It takes a lot of effort and work to get the people hooked in at first. There is a huge change over of people, particularly in the Paradise area. You get people educated. They find out about it, and then they are gone. You are reeducating people again that this is something that is available and good quality. Sometimes it's something that you can't even get at other stores.

C. Budget can be a key driver

Stigma that Alaska Grown costs more

On the one hand, producers and consumers alike may hold the belief that it is more expensive to go with local produce than it is to buy produce that is shipped in. Some respondents believe that anyone on a budget who believes Alaska Grown is more expensive will simply not buy the brand for that reason.

What no one has really touched on is the economic point of view. I think that the problem you still find is when people look at their pocketbook. They want Alaskan Grown vegetables; they want to invest in their own. But, at the same time, it comes down to the bottom line. In the wintertime, they pay less because it's coming from outside. Is it worth it to me to go (to the farmer's market) when I can go to the store and get it for a fraction of the cost? They still weigh the pros and cons. You do get the people that have the loyalty because Alaskan Grown is fresher and better, but I still think people are looking at the cost.

I think that there are two different kinds of consumers. There are the ones that definitely identify with Alaskan Grown. They are going to go there first, look for that, and try to purchase those items. But, I think there are people that are watching their pocketbook who are going to buy the cheapest thing on the shelf.

Further clarification from the focus groups suggests that the price of Alaska Grown produce is, in fact, not more expensive in the stores. However, it may well be more expensive to buy Alaska Grown from farmer's markets because they do tend to mark-up the price because of their short selling season.

When you are talking about buying produce out of the store...their potatoes, carrots and even lettuce in the summertime is terribly competitive. But, I understand at the farmer's market they have to mark things up because of the cost of living up here. You have to understand the cost of what they are charging in the store, whether it's Fred Meyer or Safeway or whatever, as opposed to what they are charging at farmer's markets. It is a completely different cost.

When you are talking about being cost effective, it is cost effective to buy at the store. But, I can't tell you how many people come up to the farm and say, 'I can't buy stuff at the farmer's market because it costs two dollars per stalk of rhubarb when I go there.' I think you are talking about two different cost bases.

There's a lot of talk that local is more expensive. I don't think it is more expensive. Maybe the farmer's markets sell their items for more expensive, but that is up to them—it's a free world. But, in the grocery stores...I can't sell to them if Alaskan Grown costs more than Seattle plus freight. I have to be competitive, or they won't buy it.

Education is paramount

Because it is very easy to assume that Alaska Grown is more expensive, it is critical that consumers are taught that this is simply not the case. Education could include the stipulation that farmer's markets set their own prices, but local stores sell Alaska Grown products at the competitive market rate.

Cost is a big thing and I think we need to educate people that it isn't more expensive to buy local grown.

Of course, local producers can only be truly competitive on some items. For things like tomatoes or green beans, Alaska simply does not have the natural wherewithal to produce in the same cost-effective ways as other parts of the nation or world.

There are certainly vegetables and other produce that we cannot grow in Alaska to compete with what the store price could be. We can't grow tomatoes and compete. The cost is too high. And, there are certain things that I would say are marginal. I don't think we will ever compete with green beans.

Store cooperation makes a difference

Fortunately, respondents say some stores take steps to support local producers and actually shut off outside supply of products that would compete with those that are Alaska Grown.

Then, when the Alaska Grown supply diminishes, the Outside products come back in at inflated prices.

I market to the commercial grocery stores and wholesalers. During the summertime, the stores are really good at cutting off the outside supply of lettuce and cabbage. Lots of times prices are lower at that time. As soon as we are off the market, we will see a hike in those prices.

I think that they are very loyal on that, especially regarding lower 48 potatoes. I think that maybe one or two percent sold are from down there. I think 98 percent of the displays are Alaskan Grown.

However, it seems some larger grocery corporations require their Alaskan stores to sell at least some Outside products. Occasionally, consumers do buy the Outside products—especially when they are not educated on the Alaska Grown concept and/or are loyal to a brand they have always purchased before living in Alaska.

If you talk to the produce managers, they say ‘corporate tells me I have to have one row of Idaho potatoes.’ Then they lay there until they are green, and then they throw them away. They will put in another row, and a week later they throw that away.

There are a few exceptions, like people that have just come in the military or have only been here a short time. They come from the northwest or they come from Idaho and are loyal to where they come from. They want a bag of spuds.

D. Differences between stores and markets

More Alaska Grown in markets than in stores

Producer respondents mostly agree that Alaska Grown product availability is more prominent in markets than in grocery stores. Apparently, the periodical Market Fresh even caters more toward information about Alaska Grown in the markets, rather than in the stores.

At the farmer's markets, Alaska Grown is the only thing allowed to breathe there. If it isn't Alaskan Grown, you are not a vendor.

Alaskan Grown is prominent in farmer's markets. It is non-existent in the grocery stores in the Fairbanks area.

Every once in a while, it will mention that we have stuff in the...but for the most part, Market Fresh has gone solely to folks in the market – like who is going to market and what they're bringing. They have some Alaska Grown vegetables in the store, but that is a completely different scenario than say the actual market, where you have more than one grouping of people focusing a lot on Alaska Grown.

One respondent even pointed out that producers have to be proactive and assertively contact Market Fresh on a regular basis to get proper coverage of their produce.

I was going to comment on Market Fresh. It's almost entirely driven by e-mails sent to the editor of that column. I e-mail him every Monday morning so that I'm in the paper every week.

Fairbanks versus Anchorage

There seems to be a difference in opinion regarding treatment of Alaska Grown in Fairbanks versus in Anchorage. Some respondents have observed a greater resistance to Alaska Grown in grocery stores in Fairbanks, where the markets are virtually the only place you can buy local produce.

You can't sell Alaska Grown in the grocery stores in Fairbanks. There is no advertisement for you there. In the farmer's market, it has entirely to be Alaskan Grown or they can't sell it for the most part.

It's very clear from listening to folks that there is a significant difference from what is happening in the Anchorage area and what is happening in the Fairbanks area. Basically, nothing that I have heard here today is happening out here in Fairbanks. We don't have any of those things going on in any of the grocery stores or farmer's markets or even the fair. We have nothing along those lines. So, that's the first step; the big difference is what the public is being made aware of in Anchorage.

Those who say there is a difference in support of Alaska Grown in Anchorage compared to Fairbanks believe that Fairbanks is just not as equipped to offer local product. First of all, there simply are not as many farms or farmers in Fairbanks. Additionally, farmers markets have been a part of the Anchorage culture for many, many years. As such, Alaska Grown has been more 'a part of life' here for a longer period of time. A couple group members disagreed with this view.

There are not as many growers locally in the Fairbanks area that can provide produce, so the quality of produce available (in Fairbanks) is much lower than it is in the Anchorage area.

We've had all the farmer's markets here for almost 20 years. We've been trying to get things into the stores, and we are quite involved with the other major growers in the area.

However, other respondents say that is not the case, as both grocery stores and markets alike are using Alaska Grown suppliers – and have been for quite some time.

I supply all the Safeway stores, Carr's stores, Fred Meyer stores, and Wal-Mart stores in Fairbanks. Every one of our bags has Alaskan Grown and on both sides.

When I was younger and more ambitious, I used to deliver my own potatoes to Fairbanks. I think the people in Fairbanks are even more loyal to Alaska Grown than the Anchorage people are. They are really fantastic people in the Fairbanks area.

The reason that respondents hold polar opposite views on the varying support of Alaska Grown in Anchorage versus Fairbanks could be that each side of the argument is referring to different types of produce. Indeed, the support for Alaska Grown may vary with different types of produce. Perhaps for potatoes, Alaska Grown gets the same support in both areas; however, maybe for leaf lettuce it is a different story.

I talk three times a week to produce managers in Fairbanks as well as Anchorage. It doesn't make a difference. They all run the same program. I sell hundreds of pallets of produce to Fairbanks. When you have a Fred Meyer ad for broccoli, it is statewide. When you have an ad for Alaska carrots, it is statewide. You find them in the Fairbanks stores; you find them in Homer, Wasilla, and Anchorage. You name it.

Additionally, some respondents detect more difficulty getting buy-in or support from farmer's markets in Fairbanks, and that could be a key reason for the perceived differences in support for Alaska Grown in Anchorage versus Fairbanks.

A comment about farmer's markets in Fairbanks... I grew up doing farmer's market down here (in Anchorage), so I have cut my teeth doing it. What I have seen every time I have gone to Fairbanks and talked to people is the farmer market programs in Fairbanks are difficult for farmers to deal with. As a farmer, I would never go down there; I would rather just start my own.

E. Perceptions of the Alaska Grown program

Consumer recognition of the logo is high

Respondents report a high level of recognition and appeal for the Alaska Grown logo, both among consumers and among the producers themselves.

I think recognition-wise, yes people know it. They see it, and know what it is.

Do people recognize it? I think yes, they definitely do. People love the Alaskan Grown symbol; they want it on their clothes, they want it on their food, they want it on everything else.

We have that in a 6 foot diameter dimension on the side of our trucks. We are a very strong believer in that.

However, some respondents point out that a high level of brand recognition or logo awareness does not necessarily translate into more sales for the Alaska Grown products.

I think it's a different question entirely between whether or not they recognize it and if they want the product.

Strong brand recognition leads to perceived quality

Others contend that simple awareness of a brand name over a long period of time can imply longevity and evoke trust. Even if the consumer does not know the actual reputation of a familiar brand, the sheer familiarity equates to a proven track record and higher quality.

I think it is very hard to measure the impact that it has. But I am a firm believer that it's branding and just like, although I don't shop at Gap or Old Navy, I pretty much shop at Bishop's Attic. But when I see Gap or Old Navy at Bishop's Attic somehow branding has happened to me and I grab that over an off brand that I have never seen before. And I really think that people have started looking at Alaskan Grown and if all other things are equal, when they look at that bag if it's not very much more I really do think they go this is quality, I think I will pay a little bit more for this.

Key is to make sure everything is marked Alaska Grown

Producers know that they need to be using the Alaska Grown brand markers as much as possible. This is especially easy for them when the division provides them with labels of some sort.

We use it on everything. We put it on our cut flowers and in our farmers market – everything there.

One thing I've decided to do this year to use Alaskan Grown a little bit more to my advantage and hopefully for my consumers. The division has provided before tiny stickers, and I'm going to use them. I'm going to put them on my tomatoes and my cucumbers and my individual items more. I'm really a big believer in branding, not because it's going to help any of my purchases right there at the market, but because they are going to buy Alaskan Grown there. I believe it will translate to when they go to the grocery store. I think the branding will make a difference.

Not to mention, consumer choice of items based on being Alaska Grown is much less likely if the products are not obviously marked with the Alaska Grown logo.

These guys are called twist ties. The only way you can tell if a head of lettuce, leaf lettuce, is Alaska Grown is if it has this on there. If this does not have it on there, then it comes from the Northwest.

Some respondents reiterate that signage tends to be lacking in local stores, and consumers may or may not see the small Alaskan Grown tags or stickers that are actually on the products.

One of the things I'd like to see is more shelf toppers in the store. I realize they give them to the store produce guys, and it's up to produce to put them up. If they decide they don't want to do it, then that's their problem.

Somebody indicated earlier in the grocery store chain the only place you will see the Alaskan Grown label in the produce area pretty much is on product itself, not as a signage advertising this is locally grown.

However, some respondents have met with resistance from corporate-owned stores. It is almost as if the stores fear selling too much Alaska Grown, and not enough of the other brands they offer. Producers have much more freedom in labeling items as Alaska Grown at farmer's markets.

The produce managers would like to have that on all their items in the grocery stores, but corporate won't allow it. They want their own branding.

At the farmer's market, we can do our own thing. We don't have to deal with corporate. We can do whatever we like.

F. What DNR can do to further Alaska Grown

Several respondents agree that DNR is making great choices in spending the current budget they have on advancing consumer recognition and support of the Alaska Grown brand.

I think DNR through the Division of Ag...what marketing dollars they get, I think are very well spent. I think they are very careful and do a good job. Now, if they had more marketing dollars, they could do more. But I think they have done a phenomenal job and are very careful with their marketing dollars. They have done a really good job of looking around and trying. Covering seasonality would be good, but I think they are constantly trying to educate consumers.

I think they are advertising the Alaskan Grown brand. They have several ads in the newspaper. One week, they might be advertising milk; another week, they might be advertising potatoes; another week, they might be advertising carrots. Right now, they are advertising bedding plants. I agree, I think they are doing a very good job.

Consumer education is still much needed

Several respondents commented on the "AG" in the Classroom program. While they believe it is a phenomenal idea, they think it is under-funded, therefore under-utilized, and has the potential to benefit Alaska Grown so much more. For instance, the need for re-educating the consumer each season when local produce becomes available could be reduced if education is part of their schooling from a young age.

There is one program that struck me as we are talking...Ag in the Classroom. I think there is an opportunity there, but it's not well funded. Children influence what parents purchase, we know that. You could teach the food miles, and you could teach seasonality. We have lost the concept of seasonality. It used to be – when I was a kid – you knew when to buy oranges because they were coming from California. You knew when to buy peaches because they were ripe, and you knew when to buy melons. Now, we don't care because they come from all over the world.

One is Ag in the Classroom. If there could be a little more funding for that so that it happens more...I think they only get a one-shot deal per school year. That's not a lot of information for a child to really get the idea.

I still think that the marketing division of Ag is doing a very good job, but they are limited on funds. Like Mark said if there were more funds available for Ag in the Classroom they would do more.

In the long-term, educating the young through the schools will reduce the need for constant re-education of adult consumers. However, in the short-term, adult consumers still desperately need education on Alaska Grown. Respondents believe some consumers do not even realize that it is possible to grow produce in Alaska. Because it is so cold most of the time and the ground is covered in snow, consumers do not see the actual dirt on the ground that would support thoughts of local cultivation.

I think the Alaskan Grown label is out there, and people know about it. I think what we need to see more of is consumer education. Maybe newspaper articles, weekly articles, or something describing shelf life, freshness, nutritional value and food miles. Those kinds of things...as far as consumer education. I keep hearing stuff about Ag in the Classroom, which I fully agree with. I find that there's is a lot of money out there available for Ag in the Classroom programs, but we are losing support at the school district level. They are really hard to work with. They are putting a stop to some of the programs with liability issues and what not. So maybe lobbying at the school district level to help with Ag in the Classroom projects.

The thing that we found made the most difference is educating people. Our big push is just to get as many people out to the farm as we can, just to show them. You would be amazed at how many people don't even realize that there is farming in Alaska period. They think the weather is too bad to even do it. I hate to say Anchorage people are more city folk...but they come out and say, 'Oh my gosh! This is dirt!' We can educate people more by making a big push to get people out to the farms just to show them what is available in Alaska and how much healthier and how much better it is. They can see how fresh the vegetables are here.

Timing of ads and literature paramount

A key aspect of educating on Alaska Grown is timing the marketing right as far as alignment with the actual season locally grown products are available.

I guess what I'm after is that we touched upon it earlier. There is only a short time that we have greens.

From our farms viewpoint, Alaskan Grown is the most important thing that's out there. It's the only way how you can differentiate. I don't think our seasonality is any different than anywhere else. How many weeks in the summer do you buy cherries? Give a number (in the advertising).

Respondents say putting out marketing materials on Alaska Grown too early or too late in the year does not allow the consumer to take action. Additionally, if the marketing comes out when the food is not available, people get frustrated.

I think the timing on this whole-page ad is wrong. It should have been done in May or June...but we do have some choices for the people.

Timing is off. I think right now the only item in the grocery stores is Alaskan Grown potatoes. Mark and some of the other people have some at their farmer's markets; but at the grocery stores, it's the only item that is out there.

Some respondents suggest the best timing for exposure to the Alaska Grown brand is just before the merchandise actually hits the stores. This way, consumers have a chance to learn about it, anticipate a little in advance, then go out and buy it when it is available.

I think you need to educate people, the consumer. You have to let them know beforehand what's coming. We have a pretty good article in the Daily News...Market Fresh, I think is the name of it. They can print in there. I hear from the farmers that we are going to have local rhubarb this week. In 2 weeks, we hear we have local leaf lettuce.

Educate on seasonality and quality

Especially for those who do not know about Alaska Grown, but also for all consumers, respondents request more DNR public education informing people of the brand name, what the logo looks like, and what it means. This would include important knowledge about seasonality, as well as the benefits associated with eating local produce over that shipped from the Outside.

I think that people saw that Alaskan Grown is definitely prominent, but I don't think there is enough education about seasonal eating.

I also think some consumer education needs to go on about the freshness and food miles, things like that, that might be a good idea for Alaskan Grown.

Right now the Division of Ag is doing a program to have chefs come to the markets and do samples using Alaskan Grown products. Maybe something in the grocery stores along those lines would help other consumers that aren't coming to the markets know about Alaskan Grown.

Respondents say it is important to back up what you claim about Alaska Grown quality by providing actual evidence, such as this producer suggests from his own experience.

Our farm last year at the state fair ran taste testing for different Alaskan Grown produce. Of course, they were blind taste tests, but we got amazing results on people preferring Alaskan Grown hands down. We did that, but now we have to take it to the next step and use that information. I think doing those types of studies or those types of samplings and using (the results) could really generate a market share.

Another way to further promote how Alaska Grown is better is to take advantage of non-GMO bandwagon. With so much publicity on the negative effects of genetically modified organisms, Alaska Grown would benefit from a clear association with non-GMO production.

We have a unique situation...genetically modified organism or GMO food. Generally, people do not want it. The government is allowing it, but states individually are banning it. Maybe it's important to have that available. From my perspective, that would be a plus that Alaskan Grown produce is non-GMO.

Further, several respondents reiterate that just the all-around guarantee that produce with Alaska Grown on the label has got to meet the highest quality standards is invaluable. That way, consumers know for sure they are getting high quality when they buy Alaska Grown.

I think the best quality that you can put out there will advertise itself. Alaskan Grown cannot be used on second grade products.

Put out the best quality produce that you can.

Get the communities involved

Some respondents suggest enlisting the help of the communities themselves in advancing pertinent knowledge about Alaska Grown. Smaller towns are already having success with further dissemination of information at the community level.

What I find in Homer is that we have some really powerful community actions committees. Our farmers market is really active, and we have several other kinds of action committees that are helping distribute the information around our community.

It takes action committees on a community level to help drive the information that the Division of Ag is trying to promote.

Other respondents reiterate the importance of having the consumer speak out when they want to buy Alaska Grown, but it is not available. For stores amiss on carrying Alaska Grown produce, consumers in the communities need to persistently speak up and request more until the stores provide these locally grown products.

One of the biggest things we have to have is the customer force behind it. If they would just ask for Alaska grown, when they don't see it... If enough of them ask, pretty soon those stores will be checking their wholesaler or wherever to see if they can get it in their store.

It's extremely important. That is what we need to stress to the consumer; if they really want it, they need to ask and they need to continue to ask.

Advocate national campaigns to buy local

One respondent suggests that the local DNR work to suggest more national campaigns on 'buying local.' Regardless of where the ads are featured, communities will benefit all over the nation when the gist of the marketing is to buy from local producers.

We haven't talked about it but I think there is a great potential in national campaigns. I have a lot of subscriptions to nationwide magazines, and it's a big item. It's 'buy local.' I know there is a program that the division just started this January, but there's a lot of opportunity to do more.

Help battle store resistance

Respondents indicate an ongoing issue with corporate home offices or store staffs themselves offering resistance to efforts toward greater exposure of the Alaska Grown brand. Producers would like DNR to help fight the store-level stigma or preconception that featuring Alaska Grown has a cost of some sort. Instead, instilling that the stores will also benefit would help the cause immensely.

For the last couple years my daughter has been kind of the Alaskan Grown girl interning with the division of Ag. Her job has been to go into stores and try to get them to display stuff. Of course, the chain stores have a much harder time putting it up than the independents. She says one of her problems is going to the markets and people have to be signed up or are supposed to be signed up to use the logo. But, a lot of them aren't, and they don't know that they are supposed to be. She has to try and get them to sign up, and she says, 'You would think I'm with immigration or something the way people try to hide from me.' She has to say, 'No, no, no. It doesn't cost you anything.' But they don't understand the Alaskan Grown program and that it only benefits them and doesn't cost them anything to be signed up to use the logo.

Just like in the newspapers where they have the article about what is available where... Maybe the division could get them to try to write up some comment about how well the grocery stores support Alaskan Grown. Maybe we could get them to put up more signage if they realized they are getting pretty publicity through those kinds of articles.

G. Recommendations

Awareness translates to loyalty for the Alaska Grown brand.

Those who know about Alaska Grown and the benefits associated with it will be very loyal buyers. Consumers who understand what the brand stands for, the quality associated with the actual products, and the economic ramifications of its support will continue to buy Alaska Grown faithfully when available.

Education on the brand is paramount.

For those who are not familiar with the Alaska Grown brand, education is essential. This education could come in many forms, such as literature, advertising, merchandising, and community events. It includes reaching out to current adult consumers, but also needs to start at a very young age, supported by local schools. It must include aspects such as seasonality, shorter food 'times', non GMO, better taste, and economic benefits. Even successful producers have a hard time getting sales going each year because the public just does not fully understand availability and the quality associated with locally grown produce.

Important to dispel myths and conquer resistance.

Part of education means teaching consumers that Alaska Grown does not mean more expensive. Another part is reaching out to the stores – corporate or locally owned, removing false beliefs and stigmas, and convincing them of the benefits of featuring Alaska Grown, and providing them with the signage and literature necessary to maximize consumer exposure to the brand. Resistance tends to come mostly from the stores, and much less from the local farmer's markets—it may also vary by geographic location in Alaska and/or type of product.

A P P E N D I X

AK GROWN Discussion Guide Group ONE

Craciun Research Group Focus Group April 18, 2012

[TARGET SEGMENTS: Producers/Growers/Farmers Focus Group ONE at noon on 4/18; Focus Group TWO is with Consumers and scheduled for May. **All sessions held at the Craciun Focus Group Facility 405 E Fireweed.**]

- I. **INTRODUCTION:** Today we are here to gain a better understanding of the value of Alaska Grown products and brand as well as your opinion about how it affects your marketing to consumers. We are seeking your opinion in an effort to make this local agriculture program even more successful. We appreciate learning from each of you, as well as from the group as a whole.

II. **WARM-UP: General Discussion of the current AK Grown Campaign**

Let's begin with the big picture. We really do not need any detail at this time, but rather general comments.

1. **How long have you lived in Alaska and how did you get involved in producing, farming, growing in Alaska?**
2. **What do you think is the current word-on-the-street; and I mean gut feeling here about locally grown produce? (*PROBE: How do you explain it to people?*)**
3. **Did anyone see this front page on the Alaska Press? Not on topic exactly but it brought to mind growing food and eating it ... in Alaska! [SHOW ARTICLE "Eat Alaska" to encourage broader discussion on the topic and more from the consumer perspective.]**

III. **IN-DEPTH DISCUSSION**

1. **CUSTOMERS:** Now we are going to move into the marketing portion of our focus group. Let's begin by talking about your customers:
 - i. **Take yourself into a grocery store right now. What do you think is the most important quality for you/that consumer when you walk over to a product to buy? [WATCH FOR: Price, freshness, quality, support of Alaska farmers?]**
 - ii. **How do you settle on that purchasing decision?**

- iii. Do you think customers really value locally-grown produce? What aspect of it exactly do they care most about? Your customers I mean!

[WATCH FOR: core markets (broad and focused) explain and seek detail on whom they see as their primary consumers.]

AK GROWN PROGRAM: Let's talk about the overall Alaska Grown brand more thoroughly now.

2. What do YOU think the value is of the Alaska Grown program?

- i. What is its main role in Alaska right now; goals? What steps has DNR taken that you have observed, supported, tried to implement?
- ii. How effective is the program in accomplishing its objectives from where you sit as a Producer/Grower/Farmer? How has it attempted to meet your ideas of success?
- iii. What do you think would make the program better?

3. **AK LOGO:** Let's take a look at Alaska Grown logo. Just give me your general impressions at this point:

[PLAN: Show visuals of AK Grown logo]

- Initial reaction? Message received?
- What does it mean to you?
- What does it mean to your customers?
- Does it leave consumers with questions or thoughts?
- i. How do you use this logo for your purposes?
- ii. Why do you use the logo? Is there a value to you as a marketing tool? What are some comments you hear about it from your customers?
- iii. What else do you do personally to promote or differentiate your product from regular produce competition? In stores? Markets?
- iv. What do you think you could personally do in the *next 6 months* to improve your produce brand? And how about AK Grown program what should they do to improve the AK Grown Brand?

IV. **WRAP - UP**

After this discussion what is your single most important piece of advice for Alaska Grown program implementers and DNR?