

Abstract

Small business is considered the backbone of the American economy. The University of Georgia's Flavor of Georgia program coordinated through the College of Agriculture's Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development offers small businesses wider public exposure for their locally produced barbecue sauces, jellies, preserves, cheeses, and meats. The program helps small agricultural producers get their products evaluated by food science professionals and marketers. During a statewide competition, entrants' products are evaluated by people from around the state including the governor at a final judging event held in Atlanta each year. This allows small businesses the chance for increased business connections, networking, and to obtain public feedback on their Georgia products. Seventy-seven percent of the 2013 Flavor of Georgia finalists reported increased interest in their products while 86% reported more business contacts according to survey results. Forty-five percent of the finalists reported an increase in sales while 27% reported an increase in profits. Moreover, 5% of the firms indicate that due to the program, they have an increase in employees. Clearly, the Flavor of Georgia has an economic impact primarily in rural Georgia.

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Small agricultural startups provide many different products to consumers, often for niche markets, that large corporations have overlooked. Often times the products that consumers are looking for is just too unique for larger companies to take the time to develop or produce. Small farms and agricultural businesses are able to provide unique products for consumers in niche markets tailored to local taste and preferences that, if successful, advance to mass-production because of consumer acceptance.

Within the College of Agriculture and Environmental Science at The University of Georgia a program has been implemented to provide benefits to small producers in the form of professional taste testing, advice on labeling, networking, and exposure to the public. This program is known as the Flavor of Georgia, sponsored by The University of Georgia's Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development. The Flavor of Georgia program provides the opportunity to small agricultural producers across the state to cast their products "into the spotlight" through a competition in various categories, such as barbecue sauces, specialty pastries, honey, meats, and cheeses. The competition focuses on the uniqueness of the individual products, how the products incorporate ingredients from Georgia, their flavor, their appeal for commercial production, and their originality. The winners of the 2013 competition were products that offered traditional Georgian ingredients such as peaches, blueberries, pecans, and honey, but in a new and innovative form that appeals to the consumer.

By competing in the Flavor of Georgia program, products formulated by small food producers are brought to the attention of many state residents with a final competition being held in Atlanta, the state capitol, thus giving the producers publicity and offering potential distributors the opportunity to sample the products first-hand. The Flavor of Georgia program has proven successful in recent years by helping new, local food producers enter the market, and to give their products an advantage in competing with larger corporate producers.

Flavor of Georgia Program

The Flavor of Georgia program began as an idea of Dr. Kent Wolfe and Dr. James Daniels in 2007 after being questioned many times about the same problems that small businesses face in getting their products to large markets. Since the program began, approximately 750 Georgia food products have entered the annual competition, a surprising number for the short amount of time the program has been in place. This large turnout of food products leads to the conclusion that many businesses face difficult decisions in the early years of their operation. The Flavor of Georgia program assists these small businesses by bringing their products to the attention of consumers, and providing large amounts of publicity for only a small application fee of \$75.

The Flavor of Georgia program attracts producers within the state of Georgia. Often times these producers have not been in business long, or are looking for a chance to further market their products. Many new startups enter the contest the year after they have formed, while others may have entered the competition every year since its inception. Products come from organizations such as Williams Bros. BBQ, which has been established for well over 20 years with a solid customer base, and Abby J's Gourmet Salsas, which started in 2011, and is currently advertising to build a loyal following. Recipes change from year to year as those returning producers seek to get feedback for their new ideas, or may simply change one ingredient to determine if the change is even noticed. Whatever may be the case, the Flavor of Georgia program continues to provide benefits for a wide range of agricultural producers. Each year the program continues to expand, attracting newcomers from around the state.

Case Study of Flavor of Georgia Program

The Flavor of Georgia program seeks feedback from the contestants who enter each year. By surveying these contestants, the administrators of the program determine what to change, and how effective the program is in achieving its purpose. Initial surveys reveal problems that small agricultural producers may face, which are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Flavor of Georgia Participants' Request for Assistance.

Flavor of Georgia Finalist Survey 2013

Answer Options ^a	Response Percent	Response Count ^b
Marketing	80.0%	16
Distribution	70.0%	14
Business Expansion	55.0%	11
Internet/web	55.0%	11
Packaging	45.0%	9
Feasibility Study	40.0%	8
Business Planning	40.0%	8
Co-packaging	35.0%	7
Food Manufacturing	30.0%	6
Product Development	25.0%	5
Information/Data	20.0%	4
Food Safety Information	20.0%	4
Food Safety Training	15.0%	3
Other (please specify)	10.0%	2

^a. To help us better understand the needs of food entrepreneurs, please select from the following areas in which you might need assistance.

^b. Number of respondents 23; only 3 did not answer the question.

By identifying problems that these producers may face, the program seeks to assist the contestants in bringing their product to market. These producers are also able to meet other contestants and try their products for themselves, providing business connections and sharing product ideas. As identified in the survey, marketing is the number one concern of entrants, followed by distribution, business expansion, and Internet/web issues. By entering the contest, these contestants are working towards remedying these problems.

Media outlets are in attendance at the event and are ready to interview and provide media exposure for producers in the contest. The final round of the competition is held near the capitol building in Atlanta. The current officials in the governor's office and the office of the Georgia Commissioner of Agriculture are in support of the program. Other high-ranking officials in the offices of the state are often in attendance as well. For example Nicki Schroeder, the overall winner of the 2012 contest with High Road Craft Ice Cream, was presented an award alongside Georgia Governor Nathan Deal, and Georgia Commissioner of Agriculture Gary Black. Georgia is committed to providing its

agricultural producers support, and the Flavor of Georgia program is one example of this commitment.

The Flavor of Georgia program seeks to provide support for the contestants even after the competition has ended and sends surveys to determine the benefits that the program has generated. The results have been positive, with businesses seeing improvement in sales and performance after the competition.

Table 2. Business Response to Flavor of Georgia Finalist Survey.

Flavor of Georgia Finalist Survey 2013

Answer Options ^a	Increase Percent	Unchanged Percent	No Response Count	Response ^b Count
Business Contacts	86%	14%	-	22
Interest in Products	77%	23%	-	22
Publicity/Exposure	68%	32%	-	22
Website Hits/Traffic	45%	41%	14%	22
Amount of Sales	45%	50%	5%	22
Profits	27%	64%	9%	22
Part-time Employees	9%	82%	9%	22
Sales Price of Product	9%	86%	5%	22
Full-time Employees	5%	86%	9%	22

^a. Following the contest, has your business experienced changes in any of the following categories related to your participation in the Flavor of Georgia.

^b. Number of respondents 23; only 1 did not answer the question.

As seen in Table 2, the biggest improvement comes in the form of increased business contacts and interest in a company’s product. This illustrates the effectiveness of the program in drawing public attention to the products produced in their own state. Consumers often have no idea that these products exist, mostly due to the localized advertising nature of the small business. If a product is produced in the southern region of the state, people in the northern region often are not made aware of its availability in the market. This problem can be remedied by diversified business connections potentially leading to distributors throughout the state. Suddenly a product produced by a small business in the southern part of the state becomes available to residents of the entire state, leading to increases in sales and revenues.

An excellent example of the benefits of the Flavor of Georgia's marketing awareness is Abby J's Gourmet Salsas spokesperson joining the "Miss O" cooking show in Greenville, South Carolina. The show focuses on healthy, simple, southern-style cooking and Abby J's message will be healthy eating and how consumers can find Georgia-grown farm to table fruits and vegetables (abbyjsgourmet.com, May 2013).

Hillside Orchard Farms is another example of growth resulting from wider market exposure in the Flavor of Georgia program. Hillside Orchard Farms currently owns its own fleet of trucks and runs delivery routes in the southeast. They reach the rest of the country via UPS and other common carriers. They run a fully modern, fully licensed FDA and Georgia Department of Agriculture regulated plant in northeast Georgia (hillsideorchard.com). On top of providing products for consumers around the country, Hillside Orchard Farms also caters to locals with incentives such as pick your own black berries, hay rides, a music hall, and even a country store. Producers who seek to retain their home-grown product appeal, while expanding into larger markets, are the ones that the Flavor of Georgia seeks to assist.

The program often affects the participants of the Flavor of Georgia long after the final competition. According to Nadine Wardenga of Cleveland, Georgia, a participant in the 2008 Flavor of Georgia, by making connections with the judges of the competition and grocery store owners, she was able to expand production of her chicken salad 100 fold. The personal connections of the competition have been long lasting, with one of the judges meeting individually with Mrs. Wardenga to develop marketing strategies for her individual products. Along with production increases, Nadine's Classic Cuisine also expanded production by entering new stores and developed new products such as Nadine's Pimiento Cheese.

Mrs. Wardenga could not be happier with her results after the Flavor of Georgia program, going from a tiny grocery store in the north Georgia town of Cleveland to now selling products in more than eight retailers. Even now, years after participating in the program, Mrs. Wardenga still receives emails of new retailers wanting to sell her product in their stores. Not only did she impress administrators of the program and grocery store owners, Mrs. Wardenga also impressed the governor and Commissioner of Agriculture. The Governor of Georgia asks for Mrs. Wardenga's chicken salad by name when shopping in local stores. The Commissioner of Agriculture also keeps in contact with Mrs. Wardenga, having her cater events such as daily staff meetings and dinners with international dignitaries. Even more importantly, people began asking for Mrs. Wardenga's chicken salad in their local grocery stores. After consumers began taking her product to family gatherings, such as reunions and holidays, even more people sought to purchase her product, building a loyal following. This word of mouth advertising has contributed to Nadine's Classic Cuisine's expansion into new markets, and increased production more than was ever anticipated.

As noted in Table 2, changes are also visible in other categories that are critical to successful small business performance. Forty-five percent of the Flavor of Georgia finalists reported improvements in the amount of sales, 45% reported an increase in profits, 77% recorded more interest in products, and 45% reported more web hits/traffic (Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development). This represents an overall improved performance for a producer for only a small investment. The Flavor of Georgia program seeks to benefit its participants, and evidence suggests that the program is achieving its goals. On average, agricultural producers have seen an increase in sales, product prices, and profits. The program itself is relatively new, but the results have been positive, and the program is likely to be continued into the future. This type of program could have far-reaching benefits if implemented in other states around the country, connecting small producers with customers throughout the entire state and region.

The Flavor of Georgia program adds value to a farmers' raw product. According to Drummond and Goodwin (2011), the average marketing bill is 81% of the retail price of a farm product while farm share is only 19%. The Flavor of Georgia program seeks to add to the farm share of a product, boosting the amount of money that the farm itself receives. Commodities such as vegetables, meats, cheeses, fruits, and honey have more appropriate value added when the producer works with the Flavor of Georgia program. Small-scale farmers can sell their raw commodities for the market price, or may add processing and packaging to increase the farm share of the retail price by adding form, place, time, and possession utility to the final commodity. When successful, this program increases income, employment, and profits to small-scale local area farmers. The Flavor of Georgia is essentially an economic development program for rural Georgia.

Conclusions

Small businesses are the backbone of the American economy, and the Flavor of Georgia program continues to assist these local producers in drawing public attention to their products. It arose from the Center for Agribusiness Development's response to entrepreneurs' needs. Over time, it has blossomed into a state-backed program assisting local producers in getting their products to market. Overall, the Flavor of Georgia program has been a success and continues to grow year after year. States around the country can look to the Flavor of Georgia to see how much it has benefited local producers. If other states follow with their own programs, small producers around the nation would be able to grow rapidly, increasing profits and overall business activity, thus boosting the economy.

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