



Michigan Food & Farming Systems - MIFFS

Supporting the Many Faces of Farming

MIFFS' Guide to Planning “Meet the Buyers” Events



Getting Started

Meet the Buyers is a great way to connect farmers and food producers with businesses interested in purchasing their products and sourcing more local produce into the value chain. It is essentially a networking event where people with mutual interests come together to make new connections and begin new relationships. There are many ways to conduct a Meet the Buyers event and this guide is designed to help you think through the process as you create your own event in your community.

MIFFS Meet the Buyers

Michigan Food & Farming Systems (MIFFS) plans an annual Meet the Buyers event each December in conjunction with the Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable and Farm Market EXPO in Grand Rapids, MI. The EXPO attracts more than 4,000 producers and industry specialists from across the Great Lakes region. Meet the Buyers occurs on



2012 MIFFS Meet the Buyers Reception

the first night of the convention and attracts approximately 400 producers, educators and industry specialists, featuring 18 “buyers” from all levels of the food system. From locally focused food hubs to independent and chain grocery stores and small distribution companies to larger produce brokers and broad-line distributors, Meet the Buyers attracts buyers who are interested in buying directly from the farmer. These buyers understand the challenges and inherent risks of farming, may or may not require food safety programs from the farms they buy from and utilize their local purchasing to enhance their offerings to their customers. The set-up for MIFFS’ Meet the Buyers is to have the buyers identified and established on one side of the table, giving the farmers room to browse the space and connect with the buyers with which they are most interested in speaking.

Planning your Event

Depending on the goals of your event, you may choose to host a Meet the Buyers reception similar to the MIFFS event or you may decide to have the farmers established on one side of the table and allow the buyers to browse and connect. There are many different ways a Meet the Buyers event can take shape, depending on your specific goals, timeline and resources. It could be a small gathering of five or six people, or it could be a huge event with more than 500 attendees. The size and style of your event is up to you. Regardless of the scope of your event, there are a few things to consider.

Target Audiences and Partners

Identify who you intend to serve with the event and who can partner with you to help make the event possible. Are you trying to reach farmers who grow specific commodities, like lettuce, tomatoes or apples? Farms of a particular size or geographic region? Narrow your search to a specific audience if possible – “all farmers” is very broad!

Next, look for people doing similar work in your community or those who are working directly with farmers or buyers that can help reach out to those groups and spread the word about your event

Site Selection

Where you choose to host your Meet the Buyers event will depend on the size of your event and target audience. For example, your Meet the Buyers event could occur in a:

- **Coffee shop or local restaurant** – great for small groups; look for a small room or space out of the main dining area.
- **Local Library** –great option if you’re looking to connect within your local community – they’ll help promote your event for free!; use a community room or small meeting room to provide some privacy and not disturb fellow patrons.
- **Community Room** – of a local business, non-profit, or government building, works well for medium-sized groups and can often be used for free.
- **College or University Space** – great for large gatherings, well known in the community and often have many spaces available of varying shapes and sizes; a bonus of hosting your event at a college or university is that you can connect the people who buy food there to your farmers!
- **Conference Center** – works well for large events or when connecting your event to an existing conference or gathering.

Other considerations to take into account when selecting a site:

- **Parking** – in general try to avoid places where you have to pay for parking or where parking is not readily available; you don’t want people to get frustrated trying to get to your event and leave before they ever get there.
- **Cost** – if you have a low or no budget for your event, select a space that is free to rent. Community rooms can typically be used for free but may be more difficult to find.
- **Food** – having some refreshments on hand always helps break the ice. Remember, you want people to mingle and chat, so keep the snacks simple (think finger foods) but tasty and seasonally appropriate! If you’re hosting your event in a community space, you may wish to work with a catering company, but make sure it’s okay to bring food into the space first.
- **Size of Space** – you need to know how many people the space can hold (maximum capacity) and how many people you expect to attend your event. If you only expect 20 people to attend and hold your event in a space that can hold 100 it will feel like no one showed up, but if you hold it in a space that can hold 40, it will feel warm and well-attended.

Format for the Event

There are a variety of different formats you can choose for this type of event. Each format has a different focus and can yield different results.



Meet the Buyers Networking Event

As described earlier, MIFFS' annual Meet the Buyers event starts by having the planning team invite up to 18 buyers to participate in the event. Buyers are required to fill out a registration form, provide information on items they are interested in purchasing, and pay to reserve a space at the event. Buyers receive a skirted table, upon which they can set up a display, a printed sign identifying who they are and any promotional or informational materials they'd like to share. Attendees, who are specialty crop growers, receive a map with buyer locations highlighted and a list of products that buyers are interested in purchasing.



Meet the Farmers Networking Event

This event is similar to the Meet the Buyers event described above but establishes the farmers at the table. Farmers register and provide information on the items they grow and are interested in selling. You may or may not charge the farmers a fee to participate in the event.



Speed Dating

Setting up your Meet the Buyers event in a speed dating style can help facilitate conversation that is more focused and direct. Essentially, the farmer sits on one side of the table, and the buyers rotate from one farmer to the next every 20 minutes or so. Select the length of time buyers can spend with farmers based on the type of conversation you think will be occurring. For example, if you are bringing together farmers and buyers who have established relationships and will be planning out their next year, allow more time. For buyers and farmers coming together who have never met, plan a shorter amount of time but no fewer than 15 minutes.



Luncheon

Hosting a luncheon or coffee hour works well for small groups of farmers and buyers who are just getting to know one another. By facilitating the conversation, you can help break the ice between the two groups and follow up with each after to the event to determine what additional assistance they may need in moving forward on making a connection.

Outreach

Once you have selected your target audience and site, you can begin promoting your event. You may or may not choose to have participants register. As it is a networking event, many people decide the day of or a few days before whether or not they will attend. Keep promotion of the event upbeat and inviting. Be clear with your message and how people can participate. An example of MIFFS' outreach is included in the examples section.

Work with partners in your community to help get the word out about the event. Using social media, like creating an Event on Facebook for your organization, is a great way to help farmers and local food advocates share the event with others. You can also send notice out about your event to local and statewide listservs and ask subscribers to share with their own networks as well.

Examples

On the pages that follow, we have provided examples of forms and outreach materials used when planning the Meet the Buyers Event at the Great Lakes EXPO for both farmers and buyers. You may duplicate these or modify them to meet your needs. For additional information, please contact us at info@miffs.org.

Evaluation

Evaluation is one of the most important, but unfortunately, also one of the most overlooked components of coordinating any event.

Before you even start planning your event, think about the goals you'd like to accomplish and how you want to measure the success of your event. Thinking both qualitatively and quantitatively – that is, think about the big picture, but make sure you set some tangible goals, like how many attendees you'd like to have.

Having a registration process or sign-up at the event helps you to get an accurate number of attendees and gather contact information so that you can keep in touch with them. Send a follow-up survey to see what participants thought of the event, like what they liked best or what could have been improved.

MIFFS also conducts a dot survey of participants to gather additional information. Each attendee is giving five “dot” stickers and asked to answer five questions by placing his or her dot in the multiple choice column. Examples of good questions to ask include: If not for this event, how would you have had access to these buyers? (a. Would not have access; b. Would have hired a broker; or c. Would have tried personally) or What is the most valuable aspect of this program? (a. Meet a specific buyer; b. Strengthen relationships with a current buyer; c. Network with other producers; d. Learn how to sell my produce).



Buyer Invitation Letter, mailed six to eight weeks before the event



Meet the Buyers Reception

at the
2013 Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable and Farm Market EXPO

**2013 Planning
Partners**

October 17, 2013



480 Wilson Road, Room 172
East Lansing, MI 48824
517-432-0712
www.miffs.org

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY | **Product Center**
Food • Ag • Bio

524 South Shaw Lane,
Room 101
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI 48824
517-432-8750
www.productcenter.msu.edu



Michigan Department of
Agriculture & Rural
Development
P.O. Box 30017
Lansing, Michigan 48909
1-800-292-3939
www.Michigan.gov/MDARD



Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable
and Farm Market EXPO
P.O. Box 277
Erie, MI 48133
(734) 848-8899
www.glexpo.com

Dear Buyer:

Michigan Food and Farming Systems (MIFFS) and the Michigan State University Product Center have teamed up to host the 2013 "Meet the Buyers" reception, which connects buyers like you to regional fruit, vegetable and other specialty crop producers looking to sell their products into this segment of the value chain.

This year's reception will again be held during the Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable and Farm Market EXPO in Grand Rapids, Michigan on Tuesday, December 10, 2013 from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. in the Center Concourse of the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel.

Last year, 17 buyers and more than 400 producers and agricultural industry representatives participated in the reception. This year, we are expanding the event by increasing promotions leading up to and during the Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable, and Farm Market EXPO, including a Tuesday workshop for growers. We are also expanding into a larger, more open space at the Amway this year to increase traffic and exposure of the event.

If your organization would like to participate in the 2013 Meet the Buyers reception, please complete and return the attached forms to MIFFS. Each participating organization will have signage and space at the reception, and producers will be provided with a map of your location and interest areas.

Please RSVP to MIFFS with your information by no later than Friday, November 8, 2013 if you wish to attend, as interest in this event continues to grow and we anticipate that space will be limited.

If you have any questions, please contact the MIFFS office at 517-432-0712 or miffs@msu.edu. We look forward to your response and your participation in this year's event!

Sincerely,

Michelle Napier-Dunnings
Executive Director
Michigan Food & Farming Systems

Brenda Reau
Associate Director
MSU Product Center of ANR



Meet the Buyers Reception

at the
2013 Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable and Farm Market EXPO

Registration Information

_____ **Yes**, we would like a table at the 2013 "Meet the Buyers" reception. The cost to attend this year's event is \$150, and additional sponsorship opportunities are available.

_____ **Sorry**, we cannot participate this year but would like to receive information for future receptions.

The following Buyers will be attending the reception from our organization:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Organization: _____

Contact Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone Number: _____ Fax: _____

Email Address: _____

We have a table-top display and/or materials to distribute.

We would complimentary registrations to the Great Lakes EXPO for the following buyers:



Meet the Buyers Reception

at the
2013 Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable and Farm Market EXPO

Categories of Interest

Production Methods & Certifications: *(please check all that apply)*

- | | | |
|---|---|-------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> All production methods | <input type="checkbox"/> Food Safety Certified | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Certified Organic | <input type="checkbox"/> MAEAP Verified | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Organic in transition | <input type="checkbox"/> Other production methods
or certifications (please
specify): | _____ |

Our Company is interested in the following: *(please check all that apply)*

- All fruits, vegetables

Vegetables

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asparagus | <input type="checkbox"/> Kale | <input type="checkbox"/> Rutabaga |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Beets | <input type="checkbox"/> Kohlrabi | <input type="checkbox"/> Scallions/Green Onions |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Broccoli | <input type="checkbox"/> Lettuce (Leaf, Iceberg,
Romaine, Bibb, etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Spinach |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Brussel Sprouts | <input type="checkbox"/> Leeks | <input type="checkbox"/> Sprouts (Alfalfa, Bean, etc) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cabbage | <input type="checkbox"/> Mushrooms | <input type="checkbox"/> Squash |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Carrots | <input type="checkbox"/> Onions | <input type="checkbox"/> Sweet Corn |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cauliflower | <input type="checkbox"/> Parsnips | <input type="checkbox"/> Sweet Potatoes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Celery | <input type="checkbox"/> Peas (Pods and Shelling) | <input type="checkbox"/> Tomatoes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cucumbers | <input type="checkbox"/> Peppers (Hot and Sweet) | <input type="checkbox"/> Turnips |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Garlic | <input type="checkbox"/> Potatoes | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please Specify): |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Green Beans | <input type="checkbox"/> Pumpkins | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Greens (Asian, beet, collard,
mustard, turnip, salad etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Radishes | |

Fruits

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Apples | <input type="checkbox"/> Cherries-sweet | <input type="checkbox"/> Raspberries |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Apricots | <input type="checkbox"/> Cranberries | <input type="checkbox"/> Rhubarb |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Blackberries | <input type="checkbox"/> Grapes | <input type="checkbox"/> Strawberries |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Blueberries | <input type="checkbox"/> Nectarines | <input type="checkbox"/> Watermelon |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cantaloupe | <input type="checkbox"/> Peaches | <input type="checkbox"/> Grapes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cherries-tart | <input type="checkbox"/> Pears | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please Specify): |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Plums | |

Other

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nuts (Please Specify): | <input type="checkbox"/> Herbs (Please Specify): |
|---|--|

Specialty Crop Producer Invitation Postcard, sent out four weeks before the event



Meet the Buyers Reception

Tuesday, December 10, 2013, 4:30 to 6:30 p.m.

Center Concourse, Amway Grand Plaza Hotel, Grand Rapids, MI

Connect and network with local retail and wholesale buyers and learn how to get your produce on store shelves and into restaurants, schools and hospitals during the "Meet the Buyers" Reception at the

2013 Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable and Farm Market EXPO

*Buyers, as
of 11/14/13:*

Cherry Capital Foods
Eastern Market Corporation
Goodness Greeness
Kroger

Meijer
Michigan State University Food Stores
Mike Pirrone Produce
Pearson Foods Corporation

Spartan Stores
Superior Sales
Whole Foods

Learn to build buyer relationships at by attending the "How to Leave a Lasting First Impression" workshop at EXPO on Tuesday, Dec 10 from 11:15 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. in Grand Gallery C at the DeVos Place. Visit www.glexpo.com for more info.

Contact MIFFS at (517) 432-0712 or visit www.miffs.org to learn more or see an updated list of buyers.

Partners and Sponsors:



MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY | Product Center
Food • Ag • Bio

Goodness Greeness



Michigan Apple Committee



Michigan Farm Bureau



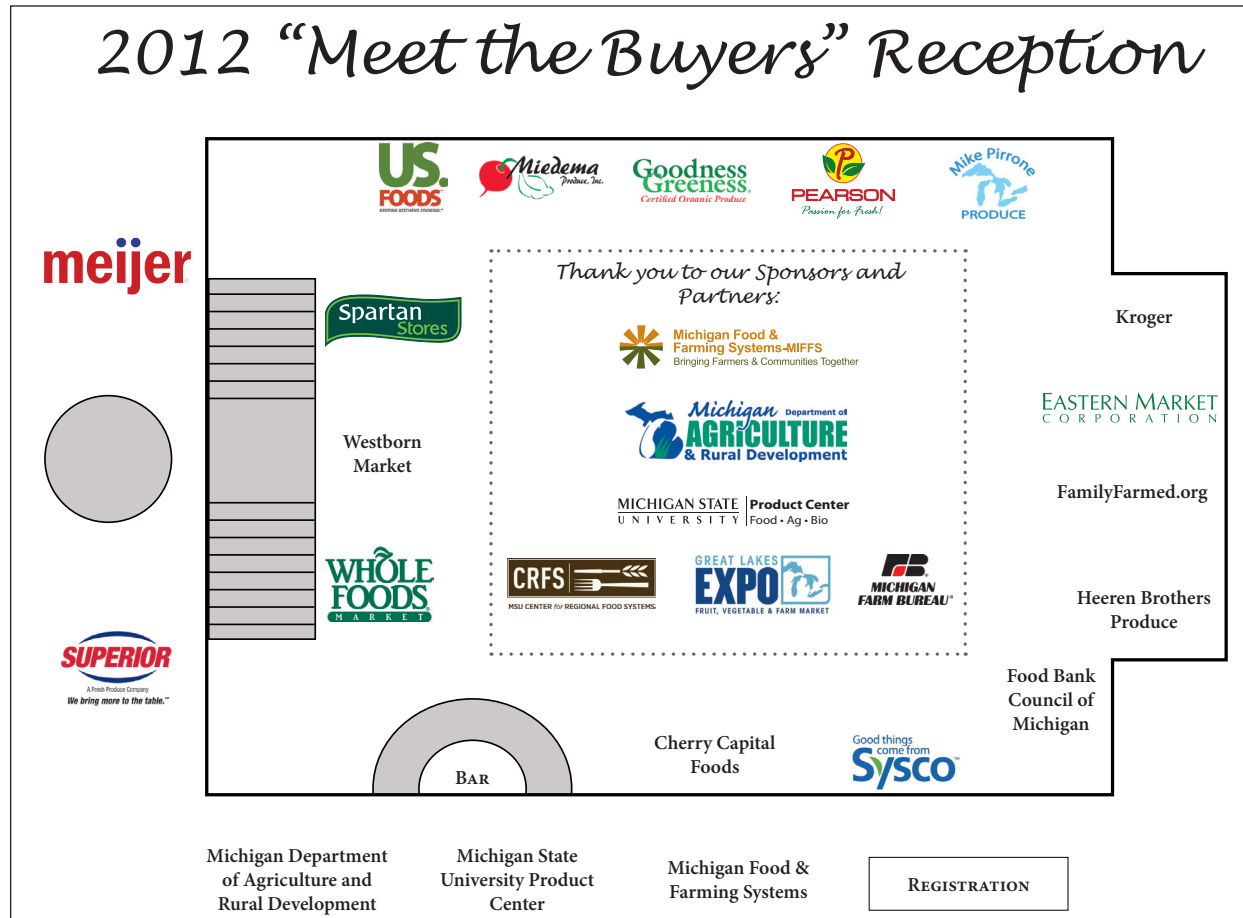
Mid-Michigan Consulting



Originz, LLC

** MIFFS also sends an electronic version of this postcard as an e-newsletter to its members and interested persons lists. Electronic distribution enables easier sharing from person to person, as well as integration with social media.*

Buyer Map and list of Needs, handed out to producers at the event



Buyer Needs

<p><u><i>Cherry Capital Foods</i></u> Production Methods & Certifications: All production methods (Organic Certified, Organic in Transition, GAP Certified, MAEAP Verified) Interest: All Fruits, Vegetables and Herbs, Chestnuts, Walnuts</p>	<p><u><i>Heeren Brothers Produce</i></u> Production Methods & Certifications: GAP Certified Interest: All Fruits, Vegetables and Herbs</p>	<p><u><i>Spartan Stores</i></u> Production Methods & Certifications: All production methods Interest: All Fruits and Vegetables</p>
<p><u><i>Eastern Market Corporation</i></u> Production Methods & Certifications: All production methods Interest: All Fruits and Vegetables</p>	<p><u><i>Kroger</i></u> Production Methods & Certifications: All production methods, Organic Certified, Organic in Transition, GAP Certified Interest: All Fruits and Vegetables, Organic Herbs</p>	<p><u><i>Superior Sales</i></u> Production Methods & Certifications: GAP Certified Interest: All Fruits and Vegetables</p>
<p><u><i>FamilyFarmed.org</i></u> Production Methods & Certifications: All production methods Interest: All Fruits and Vegetables</p>	<p><u><i>Meijer</i></u> Production Methods & Certifications: All production methods Interest: All Fruits and Vegetables</p>	<p><u><i>Sysco - Grand Rapids</i></u> Production Methods & Certifications: All production methods Interest: All Fruits and Vegetables</p>
<p><u><i>Food Bank Council of Michigan</i></u> Production Methods & Certifications: All production methods Interest: Asparagus, Beets, Broccoli, Cabbage, Carrots, Cauliflower, Celery, Cucumbers, Green Beans, Greens, Kale, Lettuce, Onions, Parsnips, Peppers, Potatoes, Pumpkins, Radishes, Rutabaga, Spinach, Squash, Sweet Corn, Sweet Potatoes, Tomatoes, Turnips, Apples, Apricots, Cantaloupe, Nectarines, Peaches, Pears, Plums, Watermelon</p>	<p><u><i>Miedema Produce</i></u> Production Methods & Certifications: All production methods Interest: All Fruits and Vegetables</p>	<p><u><i>US Foods</i></u> Production Methods & Certifications: All production methods, Organic Certified, Organic in Transition Interest: All Fruits and Vegetables</p>
<p><u><i>Goodness Greenness</i></u> Production Methods & Certifications: Organic Certified; GAP Certified Interest: All Certified Organic Fruits, Vegetables, and Herbs</p>	<p><u><i>Mike Pirrone Produce</i></u> Production Methods & Certifications: Certified Organic, GAP Certified Interest: All Fruits and Vegetables, Cabbage, Carrots, Cauliflower, Cucumbers, Green Beans, Greens, Kale, Lettuce, Parsnips, Peppers, Pumpkins, Squash, Sweet Corn, Cranberries, Rhubarb</p>	<p><u><i>Westborn Market</i></u> Production Methods & Certifications: All production methods Interest: All Fruits and Vegetables</p>
<p><u><i>Pearson Foods Corp.</i></u> Production Methods & Certifications: All production methods Interest: All Fruits and Vegetables</p>	<p><u><i>Whole Foods Market</i></u> Production Methods & Certifications: All production Methods, Organic Certified, Organic in Transition, GAP Certified Interest: All Fruits and Vegetables</p>	<p><u><i>Whole Foods Market</i></u> Production Methods & Certifications: All production Methods, Organic Certified, Organic in Transition, GAP Certified Interest: All Fruits and Vegetables</p>



Michigan Food & Farming Systems - MIFFS

Supporting the Many Faces of Farming

Michigan Food & Farming Systems (MIFFS) is dedicated to supporting the many faces of farming, particularly our beginning and historically underserved farmers. These farmers grow diversified crops and raise animals, they live in rural and urban areas, and they farm individually, in groups, on incubator farms, and as cooperatives.

As a statewide, membership-based nonprofit organization, MIFFS has been connecting farmers to resources and opportunities since 1998. We honor each farmer's passion for working the land and growing the food, while also recognizing that they can and must do it in a way that is viable and sustainable for the earth and for their pocketbooks.

Our Mission:

MIFFS connects beginning and historically underserved farmers to resource opportunities for developing profitable and environmentally sustainable livelihoods

Our Vision:

MIFFS is playing a critical role in making smaller-scale farming an attractive and viable livelihood

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