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From Farm Gate to Digital Marketplace: How Online Promotion is Reshaping Food and Agribusiness?

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Across India, mobile phones have become part of everyday farming life. Farmers use them to exchange messages, access information and stay connected with buyers, yet many have not converted these routine digital activities into reliable ways of marketing their produce. The main challenge is often not the absence of a device, but the time, practical knowledge and confidence required to use digital channels consistently. For food and agribusiness, closing this gap could help producers reach customers more directly and build stronger commercial relationships.

Why food marketing is moving online

Traditionally, agricultural produce has travelled through several intermediaries before reaching the final consumer. Each stage can add useful services, but it can also reduce the portion of the final price retained by the producer. Direct-to-consumer marketing offers another route: farmers and food businesses can communicate with buyers themselves, explain their products and potentially retain a greater share of the value generated. Research discussed by Weingarten et al. (2023), drawing on Adam et al. (2016), identifies closer customer relationships and improved returns as important attractions of direct selling. The COVID-19 crisis demonstrated the value of having more than one route to market. Closures and disruption affected established buyers such as restaurants, hotels and schools, while some local and regional food businesses responded by adapting their sales methods and finding new customers. Thilmany et al. (2021) describe the resilience and adjustment shown by local food supply chains during this period. In the United States, online sales of local and regional food reportedly rose by 360% between August 2019 and May 2020 (Csordás et al., 2022). Businesses that already had a digital presence were better positioned to respond quickly, while others had to build their online capacity during the disruption. Digital communication can also help address consumers' desire to know where their food comes from. Local products may be perceived as more traceable and trustworthy, and a review of 550 studies found evidence that consumers often express a willingness to pay more for local food (Feldmann & Hamm, 2015; Weingarten et al., 2023). Social platforms allow small businesses to share information, answer questions and tell the story behind a product without the entry costs associated with many traditional promotional channels (Pulizzi, 2012, as cited in Weingarten et al., 2023).

The difference between having access and using it well

Having a website or social media account does not automatically mean that a business is using digital marketing effectively. Csordas et al. (2022) examined 310 Austrian farm shops and grouped them according to the maturity of their online presence. The largest category (169 shops) had no digital presence. 74 had only a basic website or social media page, 43

were still developing their online activity, and just 24 were classified as highly developed digital users. Even this leading group made limited use of straightforward tools such as newsletters, registration forms and YouTube. Evidence from the United States also suggests that online selling remains underused. O'Hara and Low (2020) found that only around 8% of direct-to-consumer farms had an online marketplace. Farms with marketplace access reported average sales approximately four times those of farms without it, as reported by Csordas et al. (2022). This result should be interpreted carefully: it shows a relationship, not proof that joining a marketplace alone causes sales to multiply. Farms with stronger management, more resources or larger customer bases may be more likely to adopt online selling in the first place. O'Hara and Low (2020) also found that rural farms with little direct-selling experience were more likely than experienced rural farms to use online marketplaces. Digital channels may therefore be especially useful where nearby customers are limited. This is relevant to regions such as Odisha, where some producers are located far from large urban markets.

What producers experience in practice

Interviews with ten direct-to-consumer agricultural businesses in Upstate New York provide a useful view of the everyday barriers to digital marketing. Facebook was widely used because customers were already active there. The major difficulty was a shortage of time rather than a lack of interest: farm work left little opportunity to create posts, record videos or keep up with changing platform features. One winery manager also observed that organic reach on Facebook had become harder to achieve without paying for promotion (Weingarten et al., 2023). The same study described a winery that introduced a membership-based wine club in 2018. Its initial target was 50 members during the first year, but the first shipment reached 76 members; within four years, membership had grown beyond 900 (Weingarten et al., 2023). This example cannot predict the outcome for every farm, but it illustrates how a clearly designed offer and continued communication may encourage repeat purchases. Some producers found that sharing knowledge was more effective than making repeated sales pitches. Photographs of seasonal farm work or short videos explaining harvest and processing practices helped customers understand the product and the effort behind it. Such content can build familiarity and trust, which may later support purchases (Weingarten et al., 2023). Studies from India point to a similar gap between the availability of digital tools and their actual use. During the 2020 lockdown, farmers surveyed in three Tamil Nadu districts relied more on phone calls and messaging applications such as WhatsApp than on Facebook, Instagram or online marketplaces to sell their produce. The respondents were unfamiliar with platforms including Jaivik Kheti, Kisan Mandi and Arya.ag, although awareness of e-NAM was comparatively higher (Pandi et al., 2023). Digital Green reported that producer groups continued to face marketing difficulties despite having a substantial presence, with about 6,000 active groups in India in 2020. Its pilot in Andhra Pradesh enabled producer groups to list products, receive orders and collect payments through a chat-based interface (Sikri, 2020). These examples underline the importance of matching tools to farmers' existing habits and providing practical support.

Five practical steps for food and agribusiness

Social media marketing can develop from basic content and online transactions towards more advanced activities such as monitoring audience responses and managing customer relationships (Li et al., 2021). A small farm does not need to adopt every tool immediately. A manageable starting point is to establish a few dependable practices and improve them over time.

➤ Create a reliable information point

Prepare a simple website, digital catalogue or shareable product sheet containing the business name, contact details, available products, prices, order instructions and delivery arrangements. Clear and current information makes it easier for a potential buyer to decide what to purchase. Basic online information was one of the features distinguishing more digitally developed Austrian farm shops from less developed ones (Csordás et al., 2022).

➤ Start with the platform customers already use

The most sophisticated platform is not necessarily the most suitable one. Businesses should identify where their customers already communicate and focus on using that channel regularly. Facebook was important for the producers interviewed in New York, while WhatsApp played a prominent role among the Indian farmers studied by Pandi et al. (2023). Research on agri-food enterprises also points to the value of combining useful content, community interaction and carefully targeted promotion (Konoplyannikova et al., 2024). One channel maintained consistently is often more practical than several accounts that are rarely updated.

➤ Explain the product, not just the price

Use short, honest updates to show how products are grown, harvested, processed, packed or delivered. Introduce the people behind the business and answer common customer questions. Educational content can help consumers understand production practices and become more confident about buying directly from the producer (Weingarten et al., 2023). Claims about quality, safety or sustainability should be accurate and capable of being supported.

➤ Build a continued customer's list

With customers' permission, maintain a contact list for product updates, seasonal availability, repeat-order reminders or membership offers. Newsletters, broadcast lists and subscription programmes can help a business stay connected even when a social platform changes its rules or visibility. The wine-club example reported by Weingarten et al. (2023) demonstrates the possible value of developing an ongoing relationship rather than relying only on one-time sales.

➤ Share skills and responsibilities

Digital marketing takes time, and farmers should not be expected to become expert content creators while managing every aspect of production. Weingarten et al. (2023) report that producers valued short, practical training and examples from other farmers; some also welcomed outside help with account management. Farmer producer organizations (FPOs), cooperatives, extension agencies and agribusiness firms can support producers through training, shared catalogue development, photography, order coordination and customer-service assistance.

Keep the human relationship at the center

Digital channels should strengthen, rather than eliminate, personal communication. A survey of 156 shoppers at Budapest's Central Market Hall found that people learned about small agricultural businesses through both personal recommendations and digital media. The researchers highlighted the importance of two-way online communication and electronic word of mouth (Wicaksono et al., 2021). Research on family dairy farms in Slovakia also reported that some customers preferred direct or telephone contact with farmers, which contributed to limited adoption of online shops (Horská et al., 2020, as cited in Csordás et al., 2022). Reliable connectivity remains another practical condition. In areas where internet access is slow, costly or intermittent, businesses may struggle to maintain online stores and respond quickly to customers (Low & Vogel, 2011; Whitacre et al., 2014, as cited in Weingarten et al., 2023). Any digital strategy should therefore fit local infrastructure, the skills available and the needs of the intended customers. Phone calls, messaging and in-person sales can remain useful parts of a combined approach.

What managers and institutions can do

For agribusiness managers, digital marketing should be treated as part of the overall sales and distribution plan, rather than as an occasional promotional activity. The organization needs to allocate time and resources for staff training, content preparation and customer service, not just for buying software. It should also track practical indicators, such as enquiries received, orders completed, repeat purchases and the cost of acquiring customers, to understand which activities are worthwhile (Konoplyannikova et al., 2024).

Institutions can help by offering hands-on training, improving awareness of existing e-commerce platforms, and assisting FPOs and cooperatives with product catalogues, digital payments and logistics. Support is likely to be most effective when it is practical, locally accessible and linked to real marketing tasks. Producers should be encouraged to begin with tools they can maintain, review the results and expand only when there is a clear benefit.

Conclusion

Digital marketing can give farmers and food businesses additional ways to reach customers, explain their products and develop repeat business. However, the presence of a smartphone or an online account is only the starting point. Results depend on useful information, regular communication, customer trust, adequate skills and the time to manage orders. Evidence from international studies and Indian examples suggests that simple tools especially messaging applications, digital catalogues and customer contact lists can provide a practical entry into online marketing. The strongest approach combines digital convenience with personal service and realistic support from producer organizations and agribusiness institutions. When used as part of a broader marketing strategy, digital channels can help producers build more resilient connections with buyers.

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