

Salt of the whole earth

There sure are a lot of city slickers these days. **Kate Hennessy** explores how a group of regional businesses managed to crack this urban market by convincing outlets to stock them and consumers to visit their website.

In 2004, 75% of Australia's population was urban and the number was, and still is, steadily growing, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. For regional businesses, this is a huge market of wholesale stockists and retail buyers. For urban consumers, regional products offer a way to connect with parts of Australia they might never see. So, how do regional businesses with a great product market their region as a credential rather than a hindrance?

"It's about getting under the skin of a region and telling that story to an audience," says Gabrielle Brewer, a public relations consultant to SMEs. "People are interested in how your product reflects something that is unique to the region you are based."

Marketing consultant Michele Smorgon says this 'story' must really be at the heart of the business. "If the story is to be successful, it's imperative that it's genuine, authentic, passionate, and at the very core of the business. Branding is then the emotional connection between the product or service and its consumer."

The taste of awards

High Valley Wine and Cheese Company is based in Mudgee in New South Wales and is an artisan cheese factory, winemaker and cellar door, and full-service cafe. High Valley's cheeses, especially its range of fetta, is the company's best-known and best-selling product and is stocked in around 80 outlets outside Mudgee, including the popular fresh produce supermarket franchise, Harris Farm.

High Valley owner, Grosvenor Francis, says the company's cheeses have been in the Sydney market for five years, but over that time his marketing strategy experienced three distinct "phases". The first phase, explains Francis, was gathering awards and other recognised credentials.

"For us, first it was about focusing on the quality of our cheese and gathering good results from recognised competitions," he says.

"Credentials are needed to get a foot in the door and gain the attention of management and staff in the places you want to be stocked."

Phase two, says Francis, was the main thrust of High Valley's marketing push and involved seducing people's tastebuds with tastings and samples.

"With something like cheese, tasting is very important," he says. "It might be the best product in the world, but if no one has tasted it, they won't know."

"We enlisted an agent in Sydney to physically take the cheese around to stores and deliver samples. She worked via commission, managed the in-store tastings and left samples to convince the staff, because they're the ones who sell, not the managers. She also attended food and wine events and began to raise awareness of our product."

It took two or three years for word of mouth to spread, says Francis, until High Valley moved out of this intensive, on-the-ground marketing and was able to rely, instead, on a core group of people recommending its cheeses, which was its third phase.



“The Adelaide Hills region is an important part of our brand story,” says Anthony Paech of Beerenberg farm. “We’ve been farming here for six generations”

What's your angle?

Do you use a local material that is in plentiful supply in your local area?

Lue Pottery in the Mudgee region uses a range of clays to make pots and ceramics, all of which are mixes made from soils around Lue village. There are lots of artists and potters in the region, but Lue Pottery uses the local materials to make its own products.

Are you the first to do something in your region that is now more common or a trend?

For example, Botobolar Winery in Mudgee is Australia's first certified organic winery. There are now five organic wineries in the region that's now being promoted as an 'organic wine capital'. Botobolar's status as 'the first' is a great marketing angle.

Does your product express something about the region that people think well of?

The Little Brewing Company in Port Macquarie has become a successful, award-winning micro-brewery. It has promoted Port Macquarie through its brand in different ways. For example, 99% of beer comes from the quality of the water used, and water is clean and in good, quality supply in this region – for business and leisure.

“If the story is to be successful, it's imperative that it's genuine, authentic, passionate and at the very core of the business”

Market the region

Beerenberg is a family owned and operated farm in Hahndorf in the Adelaide Hills that has tapped into its 'regionalism' with vigour. The farm has been in the Paech family since they settled in Hahndorf in 1839, and it produces jams, chutneys, dressings, honey, jellies, mustards, olive oil, sauces and other condiments. Its products are found in 28 countries.

“We have been exporting our food service lines internationally since the mid 1980s and for the past 10 years we have focused heavily on developing our retail sales in the eastern states of Australia,” says managing director, Anthony Paech.

These days, approximately 70% of Beerenberg's

sales revenue comes from outside South Australia through channels such as hotels, airlines, Coles, Woollies, independent supermarkets, butcher shops, gourmet food stores and fruit and veg shops. Yet, Beerenberg has stayed savvy to the fact that the Adelaide Hills is “one of South Australia's 12 well-known tourism regions” and continues to weave the region deeply into its brand.

“The Adelaide Hills region is an important part of our brand story,” says Paech. “We've been farming here for six generations and this story is key to our marketing. As an Australian family business, it's vital that we communicate this authenticity to our customers, because it's key to the quality of our products and what makes us different from many other businesses in this field.”

Paech says that Beerenberg's online channels, with beerenberg.com.au as the centrepiece, are essential to targeting national and international markets. The website is impressive: it's slick, colourful, informative and interactive, and features a special tool called 'The Provenance Pathway'. This tool allows consumers to trace the method of manufacture and the origin of the ingredients in specific Beerenberg products by simply entering the last six digits of the barcode.

“Provenance Pathway emphasises our regional roots and the quality of our products,” says Paech. “It has received a lot of attention. We landed two big Coles and Woollies deals at the same time it was launched, so it's hard to measure the sales impact, but it's been the third highest-ranking page on our site since it was launched.”

While High Valley's website is more basic than Beerenberg's, it follows suite in taking full advantage of the fact that it's based in a picturesque tourist region, with lots of visitors from Sydney passing through.

“We have a wide spread of tourists visiting our cellar door, tasting our product,” says Francis. “We achieve a 90% strike rate with customers who taste here, and we always give them a list of stockists and observe their interest in finding their 'local shop'.”

High Valley's website replicates this full list of stockists for tourists to check later.

“We use our website to re-inforce our marketing messages,” says Francis. “Our plan is to improve the website by adding video of our cheese-making process and more photographs of our operations.”

Tips from the experts

Beerenberg

Make sure you know what your brand stands for and offers what differentiates you from your competitors? Weave this into your brand messages.

Provide customers with details about how your product is made. In this information age, audiences appreciate detail, authenticity and transparency.

Experiment with the digital channels and ensure your website is professional, reflects your brand, and customers can easily connect with you. Don't be afraid to try social media.

High Valley

Establish credentials such as awards to back up the fact that you have quality products and continuity.

Make sure your quality control and delivery processes are spot on, because you'll need it to sustain your marketing efforts. There's no point being a three-month wonder. People will need to know you can follow through.

Establish a customer base by giving people an appreciation and understanding of your product. Do this by supporting sales staff and people in shops, not necessarily the manager.

We would like to expand our website with recipes and general cheese information."

Look them up - and down

Francis says a co-operative approach was, and still is, essential to High Valley's marketing strategy.

"We supply restaurants and other outlets in Mudgee with our cheese and they state it's our product on their menus and so forth," says Francis. "Cross-marketing each other's products is a feature of Mudgee's business community."

If showing up at a neighbouring business with a crate of your goods isn't your style, a good starting point, says Brewer, is contacting the local tourism body or industry network in your area to see what marketing opportunities might be available.

"Many local tourism bodies run co-operative marketing campaigns with other businesses, promoting the group to an interstate or urban market," she says. "This might include advertising, public relations, marketing, trade shows and food events. Find out what local branding already exists and adopt it into your own."

And if you can't join them, beat them. While you're surveying partnership opportunities, don't forget to check out what the competition is doing; it's called basic competitive analysis.

"First, find out who your competitors are in the regions you want to expand into, preferably the bigger more established businesses, then go to their website for ideas on how they do it," says Brewer. "Look at how they promote their brand to different markets."

Smorgon says a Google search for your brand and your competition's will show where your consumers are online. "Go to them instead of making them come to you," she says. "Once you've found them, do some 'real time' market research by offering something for nothing to sign up or register on your website."

Using social media

Beerenberg has leapt on social media tools such as Facebook, flickr and YouTube to maintain an informal, friendly conversation with interested customers. It also manages campaign websites such as competition website aussiebbqlegends.com to keep the brand active, fun and alive.

"Through Facebook, we give informal updates on anything that is going on, usually product development, 'Strawberry Patch' updates and trips I might be taking," says Paech.

Smorgon applauds Beerenberg's bold approach to social media. Many SMEs are scared off by the social media applications themselves, which can usually be pretty easily mastered, and don't reach the stage of examining the benefits they can bring, she says.

"The big appeal of social media tools is that they have no initial outlay financially, but they do involve time," says Smorgon. "So work out how much time you are willing to devote weekly to social media, and maintain that. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Flickr are the most heavily frequented sites. Most of these have a facility called 'geo tagging' so you can focus your social media efforts on urban or regional locations."

Beerenberg, of course, has made a big investment in its website. However, if your business is not ready for that, there are still simple steps you can take to improve your regional appeal to a wider audience.

"Make sure your product is described to appeal to urban and international markets, not just local markets. Ensure there is international delivery or contact information with appropriate dial codes," says Brewer. #