

PUTTING THE 'LINCS' IN THE SUPPLY CHAIN

Farmers have taken their goods to market since time immemorial but in today's economic climate, finding a fair price for their produce can be quite a challenge. Janet Richardson meets a north Lincolnshire farmer who has made marketing his business.

LOVE 'em or loathe 'em, the national supermarket giants provide the one-stop shopping experience central to today's busy lifestyle.

But although they hold most of the supply chain links in their hands, there is a growing recognition that customers want to know where their food has come from, over how many air miles it has travelled and, in the case of meat, how the animals have been treated.

Paul Davey, who farms 1300 acres, mostly between Brigg and Grimsby, started his marketing operation Ideal Lincs in 2004, initially to deliver fresh produce to restaurants and takeaways.

As well as supplying wholesale markets, it is now delivering locally sourced products as a Regional Food Hub – supplying the best of Lincolnshire and East Riding of Yorkshire to seven Asda stores either side of the Humber estuary.

But Paul's learning curve in marketing started at an early age when he accompanied his father delivering onions to local customers. He recalled: "I remember going round the shops with him in a Transit van; he was a more active marketeer of his produce than the mainstream farmer." Although Paul added he knows a lot of farmers in north Lincolnshire who have always had a pro-active approach to marketing their crops, citing pick-your-own schemes as an example.

"There is a bit too much emphasis now about how farmers have got to change; a lot of the time they have to play with a very difficult deck of cards with bureaucracy and cost of production 'hands' tied behind their backs. Sometimes it is slightly insulting to say they have got to improve their marketing skills."

Paul has been in farming for as long as he can remember; from the age of 18 months he would be in the pick-up truck with his father. Like most farmers' teenage sons he spent school holidays helping with the harvest and his gap year between school and university was also spent on the farm. Paul graduated from Newcastle in agricultural economics and food marketing, came home and pretty much learned how to do every job on the farm.

"Up to a couple of years ago I was still doing jobs like combining and stone separating but more and more of my time was taken up selling our own produce and looking for more reliable deals for our products; the road that we took led us to handling other people's produce more and more. We were lucky to become involved with suppliers such as Curtis's of Lincoln and Pocklington's of Withern who had an interest in seeing their products going into multiple retail."

This evolved into a business that needed managing in its own right with administration staff and full-time drivers, thus Ideal Lincs was

born. Paul heads a four-strong team who now also make their expertise available to some of the smaller suppliers, freeing them to concentrate on their products.

Ideal Lincs manages one of Asda's 15 regional hubs with more than 100 lines from producers in an area stretching from Malton in the north down to Stamford. Products range from Paul's own-grown onions to honey, four different Lincolnshire plum breads, flapjacks, pork pies and sausages as well as beer and mineral water.

Although the business only supplies processed and cooked meat products, Paul believes there is still a place in the food chain for organised, well-run local abattoirs: "If animal welfare and the carbon footprint was the issue and not passed-on cost, then surely the local abattoir has a place in the local supply chain."

How local is local?

Local produce has a broader definition in Paul's eyes; for instance one of the products supplied through Ideal Lincs is coffee that has been roasted by one of his suppliers.

"We have to be careful about being too precious about how local is local. It is produce that stimulates employment and which sustains and increases the number of jobs in Lincolnshire and in the industry."

This also includes exporting to nearby regions and initiatives such as Select Lincolnshire, whose branding is being incorporated by Ideal Lincs for some of the product ranges, are backing the regional angle. "There is no harm in shouting about what we are doing – Lincolnshire is the breadbasket of the country and people have a keen interest in reconnecting with where their food comes from."

Paul continued: "Realistically we are in a very large county and need to start making the food industry a more attractive career opportunity for the graduates leaving university otherwise we will see a brain drain. While it is nice to see local products such as stuffed chine, it is important we don't lose the people in the county."

The value of branding was first recognised by the farm in the 1970s – delivering South Humberside Onions branded produce to the national wholesale market. "We realised the need to know where something comes from has a sales value. We all come from somewhere and are proud of where we come from."

About 5000 tons will be packed and marketed this year – two thirds of which will be from the farm's own production, harvesting taking place throughout July, August and September with onions going into store.

Paul added the farm was one of the first to



Paul Davey – a pro-active approach to marketing.

grow potatoes in the north Lincolnshire Wolds and has earned a reputation for its Maris Pipers. It is also a member of the Green Pea Company, which forms part of the Birds Eye Vining Group – possibly the largest pea-growing co-operative in Europe.

They also grow wheat, rape and barley, the cereals marketed through Centaur Grain, but last year ended 80 years of sugar beet production, freeing more land for onions.

In tune with the current climate, Paul is looking at various energy crop contracts and believes it is important that the farming industry should grasp hold of this opportunity so the UK does not become a net importer of biofuel – 'it would be embarrassing'. There is already a significant amount of used vegetable oil leaving the country to be processed in Germany. "Our Euro neighbours are stealing the march on it."

According to Paul there has to be a cohesive joined-up operation within the farming industry although he acknowledges it is less challenging a tactic to carry on with what has always been done rather than jumping into the void and backing a new project.

Although the farm is predominantly arable, it still runs a herd of 100 ewes and 150 lambs, the progeny of black-face mules crossed with Texel tups to produce reasonably lean meat and hardy enough to stay outside, lambing taking place in April and May. All of the finished lambs go through Louth livestock market – "It is a case of use it or lose it," he added.

"In creating a highly efficient food supply chain – we have gone a long way to come back. The food industry has forgotten about who its consumers and customers are. We have still got to serve those customers, that is the farmer's ultimate goal."