

Florida MarketMaker and Florida Food Connect: Using E-commerce to Enhance Seafood Marketing in Florida¹

Charles M. Adams and William Barker²

Introduction

Florida commercial fishermen are important contributors to the nation's seafood industry, catching more than 80 percent of the country's supply of many important species, including most of the nation's spiny lobster, grouper, pink shrimp, tilefish, and stone crab. In recent years, the farm-to-table movement has been sweeping the country. Florida has been no exception, and consumers are looking to find fresh seafood originating in Florida's coastal waters. But look no further, because Florida's seafood industry lands approximately 100 million pounds of seafood annually and currently has an estimated annual economic contribution from sales that exceeds \$650 million (NOAA 2014).

Florida MarketMaker / Seafood

While the state and many non-profit organizations provide information to the Florida seafood and aquaculture industry to help them market their catch, they offer few resources facilitating e-commerce. As a business tool, e-commerce can help expedite the buying and selling of seafood products among consumers, producers, and other businesses within the food industry value chain. E-commerce is a new promotional strategy producers can use to improve their marketing efficiency (Tomey and Wysocki 2009). For example, the affiliated websites Florida MarketMaker



(<http://fl.foodmarketmaker.com>) and Florida Food Connect (<http://flfoodconnect.com/>) are designed to enhance the online presence for the Florida seafood industry. Web portals such as these increase the visibility of seafood businesses by allowing dealers to create a searchable online profile attracting more customers seeking locally sourced seafood.

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2. Charles M. Adams, professor, and William Barker, graduate student, Food and Resource Economics Department, University of Florida, UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL.

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MarketMaker was originally designed by the University of Illinois to help sellers and buyers of local agricultural products find each other more efficiently via the Internet (MarketMaker 2014). The Florida MarketMaker has specific information to better serve licensed seafood dealers (Florida MarketMaker 2014). Food Connect, a companion website whose primary purpose is to support the state's Farm-to-School program, was developed by the University of Florida in collaboration with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Affairs (Florida Food Connect 2014). While the two websites have very different layouts and accessibility features, they perform many of the same functions and use a common database of searchable subscriber profiles. This common database is referred to as the Florida MarketMaker. Users can create an account and build a profile on either website, with that same information available to both websites and searchable by consumers and buyers looking for fresh, local seafood.

Florida MarketMaker is a free resource for any licensed seafood dealer who wants to connect with amateur foodies, celebrity chefs, and local restaurants looking for Florida fresh seafood. To date, twenty states have joined the national MarketMaker program, including all five Gulf Coast states. The Gulf State Marine Fisheries Commission has been a big supporter of the national platform, with Gulf Coast seafood playing a large role in the overall success of MarketMaker. Ever since joining the program, the Gulf Coast's seafood dealers' presence in the MarketMaker program has helped to create awareness for other locally sourced foods, and vice versa.

At its core, Florida MarketMaker is an online, searchable directory service that provides certified seafood dealers the ability to create an online business profile. A profile would contain detailed information about the seafood business, product availability, and other details that would help buyers better understand the business and the products offered. Establishing an e-commerce presence and enhancing the visibility of businesses to potential buyers on the Internet is the primary goal of the program. The MarketMaker website uses an interactive mapping system coupled with a searchable database to help retailers, chefs, and consumers locate seafood dealers within their regions. Farmers, aquaculturists, and other small businesses can also use the website to discover new niche markets for their products, along with nearby processors, wholesalers, and farmers' markets (MarketMaker 2014).

When you register with Florida MarketMaker, you create a customized business profile that will be maintained in the MarketMaker database. This profile will contain

descriptions of your business's products and services, as well as contact information, including your website URL (website address). You can also upload pictures and give a brief narrative on your business's value proposition.

The fundamental value of Florida MarketMaker is that it provides buyers access to businesses via powerful search and mapping features. In this way, a buyer looking for local seafood would type "*Florida fresh seafood*" into any search engine and a link to Florida MarketMaker will show up as an option, usually within the first several pages. On Google, it shows up on the front page with its GOOD site rating highlighted. A potential customer could then locate a business through a search on Florida MarketMaker. The search results with a map of all seafood businesses' custom profiles and their products will appear. If potential customers find the products for which they are looking in your business's description, they would then link to your profile and from there directly to your business's website.

Florida MarketMaker and Florida Food Connect are not transactional websites; instead they function as online directories with interactive mapping technology. Your profile will inform buyers about your business and products and provide contact information to help you connect with consumers.

E-commerce

Online shopping is fast becoming the preferred method of point-of-sale interactions, especially among coveted demographics such as women and 18- to 25-year-olds (Smith 2011). More and more businesses use the Internet and e-mail to sell goods and services, and Amazon and several other large US retailers have opted out of the traditional storefront format entirely. The primary reason normally cited is the lower costs to both businesses and consumers.

E-commerce may seem to have been around for a long time, but in fact it is still relatively new, and not all merchandise has an online success story, yet. Food in particular presents some interesting challenges to an online marketing plan. People prefer to see, touch, and inspect their food before they purchase, and shipping presents some significant problems for perishable items. Seafood in particular presents a challenge because of its fragility and perishability. Therefore, understanding the difference between e-commerce and traditional sales efforts is critical to the successful implementation of an online marketing program. Additionally, businesses must be able to identify

any special considerations and make contingencies for these when participating on online food sales and e-commerce.

Below is a list of some of the major issues that licensed seafood dealers should consider before undertaking an online marketing campaign.

- Buyers tend to associate online shopping with “deals.” Many times online prices are lower than traditional retail prices.
- Information accessibility for buyers leads to greater price transparency and stronger competition because of the ability to cross-reference products via search engines.
- This immediate and broad access to information gives buyers an unprecedented amount of product intelligence. In particular, online reviews written by previous customers, employees, and organizations can influence potential new customers’ views about your product and services without their ever having had any interaction with your business.
- One of the largest differences between traditional sales and e-commerce is the potential for technical problems that have nothing to do with your business or product to influence the customer experience. If a competitor’s website crashes and your own functions well, you might benefit...and vice versa.
- E-commerce also entails a different cost-sharing arrangement between businesses and consumers for each transaction. Generally speaking, buyers do not expect to pay sales tax or the cost of shipping. Tax requirements pertaining to online sales vary by state (Fitzpatrick 2014).

Prospective online marketers must understand possible e-commerce pitfalls and find remedies for them. More importantly, they must recognize that e-commerce requires a different set of skills to effectively target audiences. Sellers must realistically assess both their available resources and their ability to use the Internet to market their products and businesses effectively.

Even if you determine that your main source of revenue is traditional, “brick-and-mortar” retail, a website is nevertheless essential because a small but growing sector of the buying public relies the Internet first—and sometimes exclusively—to shop. Many buyers today demand access to your business’s profile and product data via the Internet, even if they intend to buy in person and not online. If these buyers cannot research you online, you do not exist for them as a potential vendor. A website with reliable information about your business and products, where you are, and

when you are open for business will open you doors to this growing population of potential customers.

To be a successful e-commerce entrepreneur, you must develop a solid and trustworthy coalition between your business, the technology, and potential buyers. You must be prepared to undertake the following obligations with a common theme of commitment to the consumer relationship.

- Take responsibility for the technology. Whether you build the website yourself or contract out the design and maintenance, your job is to make sure information is correct and up-to-date. Remember that buyers can easily spot stale content and there is no face-to-face interaction in the online marketing environment to repair the impression that your information (and therefore potentially your product) is not “fresh.”
- Make sure the condition of your website is always fresh. If you start a blog or frequently post business updates or news, you must maintain a regular schedule. Never allow pricing or product information to become outdated on your website, and provide timely, accurate responses to any and all online inquiries.
- Make sure to maintain and update routine online operations and security protocols. Demonstrate responsible handling of all buyer information that comes into your possession.

Steps for Creating an E-commerce Profile

A customized profile is the primary approach to connecting and interfacing with potential buyers and sellers on the Florida MarketMaker and Florida Food Connect websites. Simply visit one of the websites to register a business and establish an account. All that is required to register is an email address, user name, password, and basic business information. Once registered, you will receive an email, usually within 48 hours, welcoming you and your business to the MarketMaker family. One of the advantages of the MarketMaker program is that a live administrator individually verifies each new user, on a case-by-case basis. This helps prevent spammers, scammers, and other potential abusers of the system from harassing legitimate users.

As described earlier, although the websites have very different layouts and accessibility features, they perform many of the same functions and utilize a common database of searchable subscriber profiles. Users have the option of choosing which website is used to create an account and

manage a profile. Again, the information will be available on both sites and will be searchable by buyers in search of fresh, local seafood. The only difference is the layout of the registration and profile pages.

Users should take a few minutes to visit both websites and then use the website with which they are most comfortable. The two websites are different, so brief descriptions of the registration and profile management processes of each are listed below. Also note that resources are available on both websites to assist new users in becoming more familiar with the registration process. These resources also describe many approaches for users to make the most effective use of the MarketMaker programs. Finally, additional information is available via University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Extension (<http://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/>) and Florida Sea Grant Marine Extension (<http://flseagrant.ifas.ufl.edu/>).

To register for *Florida MarketMaker*, go to <http://fl.foodmarketmaker.com>. On their homepage, click the *Register* button located in the bottom right corner of the “Register Your Business” box. This will bring you to a page where you can create an account. Please note that you can always change subscription preferences later on your account management page. Once registered, your business will receive an email, usually within 48 hours, welcoming you to the MarketMaker family. Once you receive the welcoming email, you can log on and create a business profile. Below are the step-by-step instructions for setting up an account with Florida MarketMaker.

1. Access the Florida MarketMaker website at <http://fl.foodmarketmaker.com>.
2. Click the *Register* button located in the bottom right corner of the *Register Your Business* box.
3. Enter your email address, user name, and password, select your email subscription preferences, and click *Continue*.
4. You are now on the *Business Profile* page and can select a business type from the dropdown box located in the center of the web page.
5. Once you have selected a business type, a form appears that allows you to customize the description of your business's products:
 - **Product Type:** Check all products that apply. This could include products under Freshwater Fish/Shellfish and

Marine Fish/Shellfish/Seafood. When there are multiple products, such as Grouper under the Marine Fish/Shellfish/Seafood category, you will see an asterisk. If you click on Grouper, the menu will expand and you will have additional options.

- **Product Attributes:** Check all attributes that you certify for your operation.
 - **Product Certification:** Check all attributes that are certified by third parties such as GAP-certified, Certified Organic, etc.
 - **Methods of Sale:** Check all that apply.
 - **Markets Served:** Check all that apply. Remember, buyers from other states may wish to purchase from you.
 - **Business Details:** Provide specific information you wish buyers to know about your operation such as hours of operation.
1. When you have finished entering *all* categories of products, click *Continue*. If you have additional categories to enter, click *Save and Add Another Profile* until you have entered all your categories.
 2. You now have the option to upload a maximum of five (5) pictures relating to your operation. When you have finished uploading pictures, click *Continue*.
 3. There are a number of *General Business Information Fields* on this web page that will be used by MarketMaker to build the searchable database.
 4. Fill in the *Contact Information* that you want to be made public on your profile.
 5. You have the opportunity to identify any *Program Affiliations* that you maintain (i.e., Fresh from Florida).
 6. Finally, you can review all the information you have provided and edit it as necessary. When the information is correct, click the *Submit* button.
 7. You will receive a confirmation email from the National MarketMaker with your username and password.

To register for *Florida Food Connect*, go to <http://flfoodconnect.com/>. On their homepage, click the *Don't Have an Account* link located in the top right corner. This will take you to a page where you will create your login information and enter basic business information. It generally takes no more than 48 hours for a profile to be approved. When you create an account, you will have to choose a business type. If you have multiple business types, choose just one

to start. You will be able to add more once you have created an account and have been registered. Below are the step-by-step instructions for setting up an account with Florida Food Connect.

1. Access the Florida Food Connect website at <http://flfoodconnect.com/>.
 2. Click the *Don't Have an Account* link at the top right of the *Home* page.
 3. Enter in your email address and user name, create a password, and click the *Next* button.
 4. You then setup your account by selecting your *Business Categories* and providing basic business information like name, address, and phone number. You also select your email subscription preferences on this page.
 5. Once you have filled in your business information, select the *Submit* button.
 6. You will receive a confirmation email from the Florida Food Connect team, usually within 48 hours, with your username and password. Once you receive your confirmation email, log into Florida Food Connect and finish filling out your profile information.
- **Product Type:** Check all products that apply. This could include products under Freshwater Fish/Shellfish, and Marine Fish/Shellfish/Seafood. When there are multiple products, such as Grouper under the Marine Fish/Shellfish/Seafood category, you will see an asterisk. If you click on Grouper, the menu will expand and you will have additional options.
 - **Product Attributes:** Check all attributes that you certify for your operation.
 - **Product Certification:** Check all attributes that are certified by third parties such as GAP-certified, Certified Organic, etc.
 - **Methods of Sale:** Check all that apply.
 - **Markets Served:** Check all that apply. Remember, buyers from other states may wish to purchase from you.
 - **Business Details:** Provide specific information you wish buyers to know about your operation such as hours of operation.
1. You also have the option to upload a maximum of five (5) pictures related to your operations and identify any *Program Affiliations* that you maintain.

2. There are a number of *General Business Information Fields* on this web page that will be used by Food Connect to build the searchable database.

Once you have registered with either webpage and have created an account, you can return at any time to update and edit your profile. If at any time you have questions or concerns about either the Florida MarketMaker or Florida Food Connect programs, you will find contact link information on each of the websites. You can also find support and additional information through University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Extension and the Florida Sea Grant Marine Extension Program.

Using MarketMaker

You are directly added to the statewide MarketMaker database when you sign up to begin connecting with buyers and sellers throughout Florida. Over time, you can add information and change your profile presentation by adding product photos. The MarketMaker program will also allow you to

- bookmark other users with whom you do business
- post products/services that you have for sale
- receive notification of sales and specials offered by others
- tell your business's story highlighting your value proposition
- improve your business's web profile by being part of a national database

The same mapping technique on the Florida MarketMaker website that helps customers find fresh, local seafood dealers in their region of the state can also help seafood dealers improve their marketing by pinpointing specific markets for seafood products based on detailed census data. This target market functionality allows you to better analyze regional demographics, helping you to more efficiently reach buyers. MarketMaker can also be used to locate other producers, processors, fishermen, wholesalers, food retailers, dealers, farmers' markets, and restaurants near your business. You can then create lists of potential marketing partners by location and explore companies of interest and connect with other businesses.

A recent improvement to MarketMaker's tourism profile has enhanced the ability of agritourism companies to participate in the program. The new profile simplifies the process of registration and makes this category more consistent with other profile categories. The tourism profile

includes three separate classifications for better clarity of offerings. If tourism is part of your business, be sure to add this profile to your account.

- **Agritourism:** Features over 30 attractions and allows users to select their specific type of facility, shopping, accommodations, and admission information.
- **Fishing Charter:** Businesses may add the type of attraction offered, charter type, fishing location, and type of fish sought in addition to admission and hours information.
- **Hunting:** Profiles include the method of hunting, permits, and types of big game, fowl, or small game, accommodations, hours, and admission information.

In March of 2013, Sea Grant generated a large mailing to the licensed seafood dealers across the state informing them of MarketMaker, its benefits, and the new tourism profile. The site now has more than 70 seafood dealer, wholesaler, and tourism profiles from across the state. Figure 1 shows the locations of seafood producers throughout Florida.

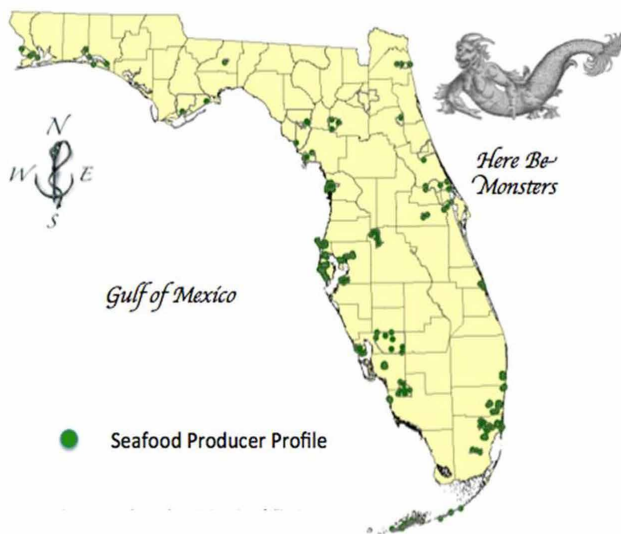


Figure 1. Florida seafood producers in MarketMaker database. Source: MarketMaker (2014).

Businesses wishing to use MarketMaker or Food Connect to sell seafood must conform to all legal requirements associated with these products in the state of Florida (FWC 2014). This includes maintaining current seafood dealer licenses, ensuring proper filing of Trip Ticket reporting (if you are a harvester and a dealer), and adhering to Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) requirements when necessary. Note: Neither the University of Florida nor the Florida Sea Grant Program is specifically advocating the use of MarketMaker or its companion

site. This document is simply informing certified Florida seafood dealers of the availability of these types of tools as an alternative marketing strategy.

Conclusions

E-commerce offers seafood producers another option to diversify their promotional strategies and improve marketing efficiency. Florida MarketMaker and Florida Food Connect are two affiliated websites that offer a free service to properly licensed Florida seafood dealers to help enhance these dealers' online visibility. The fundamental value of Florida MarketMaker is that it provides businesses the ability to establish web-based searchable profiles that may attract more customers seeking locally sourced seafood. However, it should be noted that not all merchandise is an online success story, and seafood in particular presents some online marketing challenges. Tailoring the marketing plan to meet these challenges and the unique requirements of online shoppers is critical to the successful implementation of an e-commerce program for a seafood business.

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