

## ONLINE STRATEGIES TO MARKET FARM PRODUCE



*As farmers continue to struggle with increasing uncertainties in the market, online marketing strategies have come as a blessing, argues Dr. Mandeep K Pujara.*

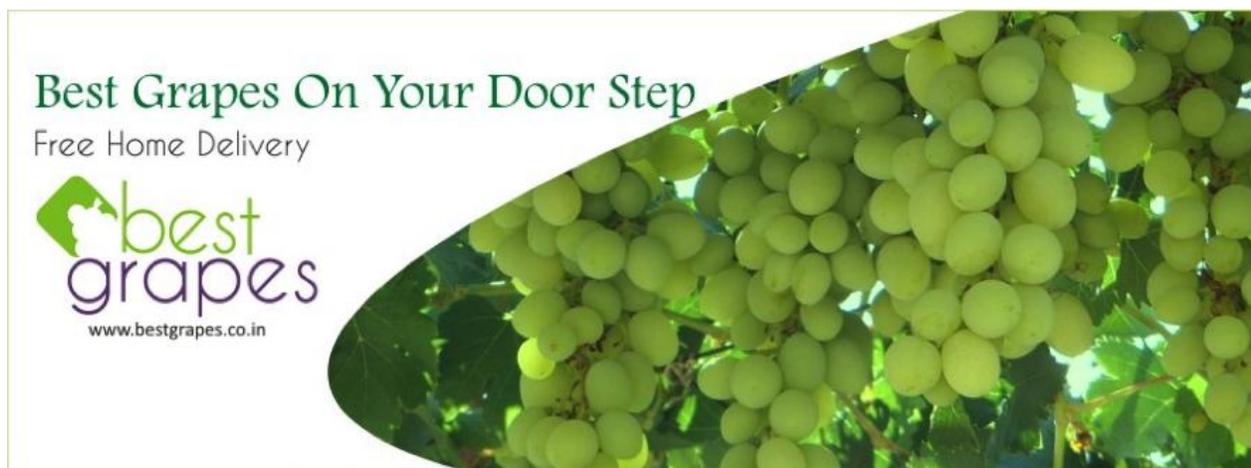
### INTRODUCTION

The Internet is an effective communication and marketing tool that can introduce farmers to a large number of potential customers. Farmers can advertise their farm produce with pictures and maps, take orders online, show product availability, keep in touch with their existing customers, and support other ways of selling. Farmers can create an Internet presence through their own website or by using a website run by a third party. About 35 percent Indians use the Internet<sup>1</sup>. This blog illustrates how farmers could use the Internet to market their farm produce.

### DEVELOPING A WEB PRESENCE

Farmers who market and sell products directly to their customers may consider an online presence unnecessary, because their business is usually done face-to-face. However, a web presence offers two big advantages to the direct farm marketers:

- a. it helps them find new customers, and
- b. it enables them to better serve existing customers.



<sup>1</sup> <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/india/>

A web presence may simply make contact information available to customers or provide details about growing practices that are hard to explain in 5-minute conversations at farmers' market stalls.

Options to start creating a web presence for farm business include:

- (1) getting listed in local food directories,
- (2) launching your own website using free and easy tools, and
- (3) engaging with customers and potential customers through social media, such as Facebook and blogs.

Few examples, to elucidate the farmer-market web interface are given below (Box 1).

**Box 1: Examples on how farmers are leveraging their web presence to access markets**

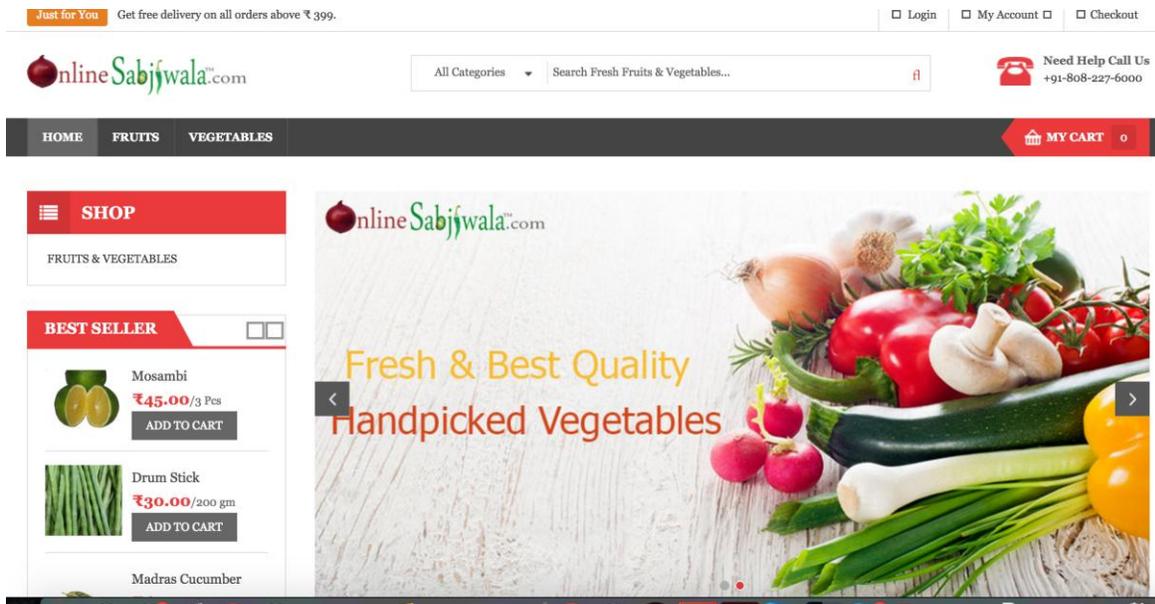
Bhaskar Kamble, a grape farmer from Nashik, Maharashtra decided to tap the potential of the Internet to sell his produce directly to the consumer. Kamble's website, [bestgrapes.co.in](http://bestgrapes.co.in) (he is now on Facebook as well) sells produce from a collective of a dozen farmers from Jalalpur, Nasik district. His plan was to sell to customers within the district, but he has now expanded to selling grapes across the state, thanks to the interest generated by his website. He says, this way he gets 2-3 times the amount he would get, if he had sold it to a middleman. Currently his initiative is limited to few farmers and the website is managed in-house by family members and friends, but he hopes more farmers will be interested to join them and that this will make the venture viable. (Source: <http://www.thebetterindia.com/23704/farmers-nashik-ecommerce-using-the-internet-grape-vine/>)

Tiwana Bee Farm is a Ludhiana (Punjab) based apiary and manufacturer of beekeeping equipment and beekeeping supplies with clients spread throughout India and many other parts of the world. Tiwana Bee Farm was established with the purpose of processing raw honey obtained from honey combs, into high quality edible grade honey. Originally a farmer, but has now diversified into manufacturing of beekeeping equipment like honey processing plant, bee hives, honey extractors, smokers, protective clothing, pollen traps, grafting needles etc. See the beekeeping equipment product's page for a complete list of equipments of this firm. (Source: <https://tiwanabeefarm.com/>)

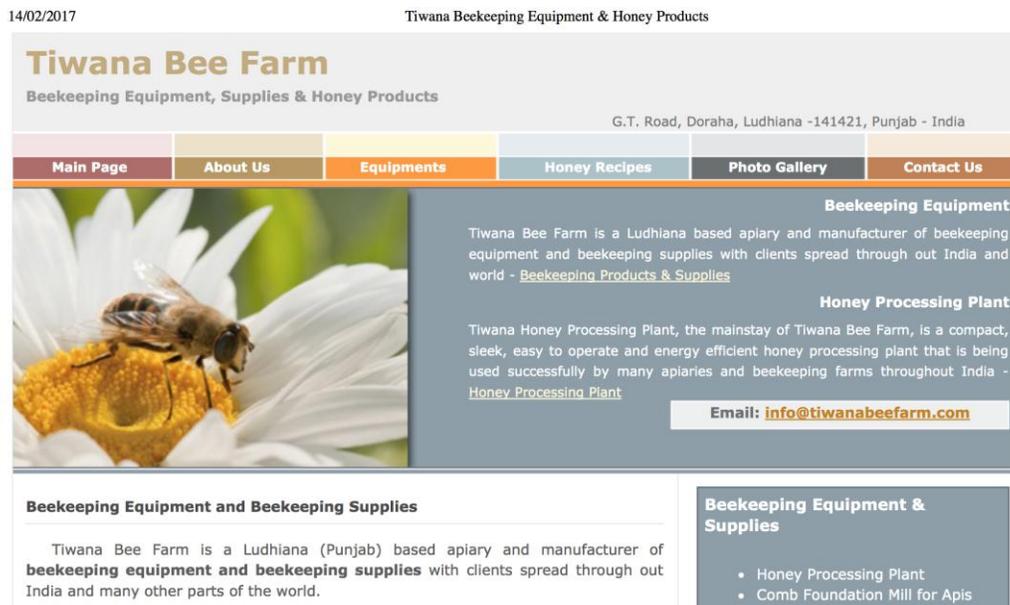
Onlinesabjiwala.com is preferred destination for buying grocery, fresh fruits & vegetables online in India, offering fresh and best prices and a completely hassle-free experience with options of paying through cash on delivery. Now shop for your daily grocery, fresh fruits & vegetable needs with descriptions and get the best online shopping experience every time. (Source: <http://www.onlinesabjiwala.com/>)

**CREATE COMPELLING CONTENT**

Farms are natural sources of interesting stories and visuals that can be posted on the Web in the form of texts, photos or videos. Not limited to photos of adorable baby livestock and beautiful pastoral landscapes, many growers also post stories about their operations and news from their farms on their websites. Other popular content on farm websites include profiles of the growers themselves, as well as workers and suppliers; how-to articles; behind-the-scenes features on operations; and news about current events, such as how the farm survived yet another hailstorm this season.



Compelling content helps forge a bond between grower and customer. In marketing, telling a good story requires differentiating products, using key words and phrases. A recent study of listings in the directory, which lists growers and farms that sell products directly to customers, observed that only a minority use more than one keyword or phrase to set themselves and their operation apart.



Instead most farms listed products available for sale, instead of employing descriptive phrases about their products or operations such as, family owned and operated, heirloom or chemical free. As the Internet increases competition, it's more important than ever to communicate in a way that makes farmer's operation stand out from the crowd.

## LAUNCH A WEBSITE

Another way to establish a web presence is to build farm business website. In the past, this typically meant hiring a web designer or spending a lot of time learning software. Today, however, websites come in many forms, including some that are simple for a beginner to build.

### Set up a basic website: Wix

Farmers can spend money to hire a company to build and host website, but it is possible to do these things for free with services like Wix. This online tool can easily construct a basic website by dropping and dragging components into place.

Basic websites often serve as the main web presence for small businesses, providing information such as location, contact information, and brief descriptions of products and services. When launching a website, it's important to keep —Contact Us information, front and center, instead of buried at the bottom. Many farmers display their contact information prominently on their home page (Box 2).

**Box 2:** [www.strawberrycws.com](http://www.strawberrycws.com)

**Chetan Verma** is a 21 year old boy from Gurdaspur, Punjab doing strawberry farming under guidance of American Strawberry Growers. Chetan who is a Gold medalist in Boxing, one day, decided to give up the sport he was passionate about. He wanted to do something new and innovative, so he decided to take up strawberry farming in a small town of Gurdaspur. After two years of hard-work he has become the most sought-after young farmer in India.

(Source: <http://strawberrycws.com/>)

To get started with Wix, one needs to sign up for an account at [www.wix.com](http://www.wix.com) and choose a template (a set format or look) into which farmers can add own content, including text, pictures, and video. Once a website is up and running, include the address in all advertising and marketing materials, as well as emails and other correspondence.

Besides Wix, there are several other free services for establishing a website, for example, [www.weebly.com](http://www.weebly.com) and [www.webs.com](http://www.webs.com).

<http://www.wix.com/website-template/view/ht>

<http://cniffarm.wixsite.com/ml/1420>

## ENGAGE IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Farmers can use word-of-mouth promotion. As of March 2016, Facebook has over 142 million users in India, of which approximately 133 million (93.66%) access the site from their mobile phones. Nearly 69 million people in India use Facebook every day, of which 64 million access the platform through

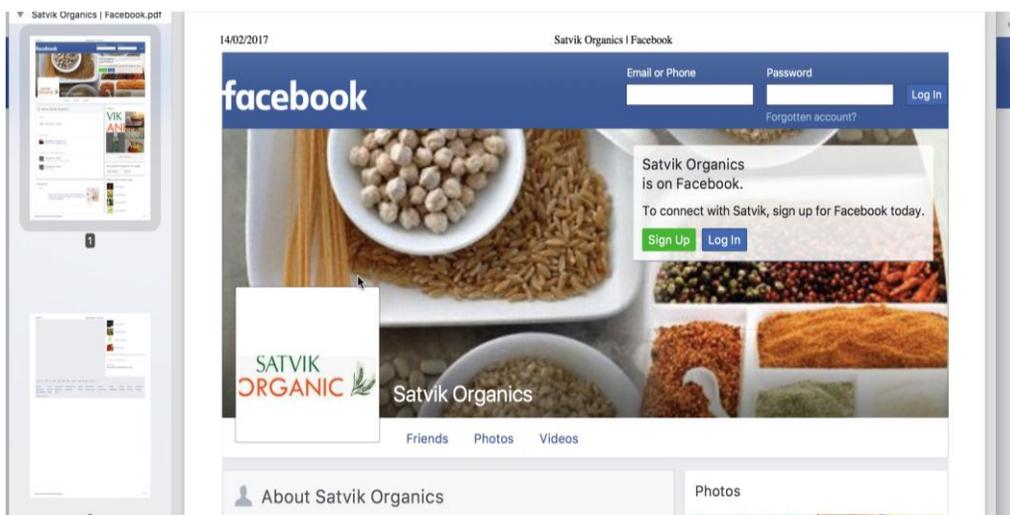
their mobile devices<sup>2</sup>. Estimated monthly active users of Facebook in major Indian cities, is given in Table 1.

**Table 1: City wise breakup of Facebook users**

City	Users
Delhi/NCR	14,000,000
Mumbai	8,300,000
Bangalore	9,100,000
Chennai	11,000,000
Kolkata	13,000,000

Source: Facebook advertisement, as on 29 November 2015.

Facebook users, primarily use it to keep in touch with family and friends, as well as to follow all kinds of things, including businesses, trends, etc. As a result, many businesses have launched their own Facebook pages to connect with customers. The idea is to share insights, spread the word about sales and deals, and pose provocative questions that inspire followers to spread the word about your business to their network of family and friends on Facebook. This is basically the old-fashioned word-of-mouth advertising, but online. Facebook business pages, have the same look and offer many of the same features as personal Facebook pages (see example below). Facebook allows users to establish a business page at no charge.



If a farmer already has a personal Facebook page, he/she can simply add a business page to account and can login the same. If a farmer is new to Facebook, he/she needs to create an account. Go to [www.facebook.com/pages/create.php](http://www.facebook.com/pages/create.php).

<https://www.facebook.com/Satvik-Organics>  
<https://www.facebook.com/randhawamushroomfarm>  
<https://www.facebook.com/jainhonybeefarm/>

<sup>2</sup> Vijay Shankar, Facebook Head of Products, Facebook Lite.

## TELLING FARM STORY ONLINE: FARM BLOGS

A blog is short for web log, an online journal organized by day of entry. A favorite tool of many growers, a blog allows them to showcase, personal and seasonal nature of direct market farms. Research shows that customers value the relationship with a grower (Hinrichs, 2000), and the journal format helps cement this relationship. Some farms employ blogs as their only website, while others use blogs to drive traffic to their primary website.



Like simple website programs, blog software is easy to use, maintain, and update. Farmers can create a blog and start posting entries within minutes where they can interact with customers via their comments on blog (see example). Commitment is critical to blogging and needs updating in a timely manner. Otherwise, readers will think the blog is out of date and might stop reading it.

There are two major free blog providers today:

- 1) Blogger at <http://www.blogger.com>, and
- 2) Word Press at <http://www.wordpress.com>.

Each of the above, offers pre-designed templates and the ability to create a blog with your own look and feel. To get started, visit Blogger or Word Press and follow the prompts to create an account and set up your blog page.

## PROMOTING ONLINE MARKETING: ROLE OF EXTENSION

Extension professionals can play a significant role to make farmers aware about the power of internet and its usage. They should organize training for farmers and provide hand-holding support to help them access this opportunity for the using online space. Extension professionals should advise farmers to exploit the potential of online marketing, either as individuals or as groups. However, to support farmers fully, extension professionals do need training. Building capacities of extension and advisory services to perform these tasks should be an important priority for extension in India.

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