

# GROWING NEW FARMERS

## A Northeast Service Providers Consortium

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### **Making Effective Referrals to Help New Farmers**

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The Growing New Farmers (GNF) Project is an initiative to provide future generations of Northeast farmers with the support and services they need to succeed. GNF is working to build an effective and enduring “service infrastructure” -- an active network of organizations committed to providing programs and services for new farmers. This active network is the Growing New Farmers Consortium

As a member of the GNF Consortium, you can provide two critically important services to new farmers: information and referral. How often do you get a phone call from a prospective or beginning farmer who has found your name somewhere, or has been referred to you by someone. The caller hopes you can help.

Initially, you may not know exactly what the new farmer is requesting or if you’re the right source of information. If, during the course of your telephone conversation, you discover the caller needs information or help you can’t provide, then ***making a proper referral is the greatest service you can provide.***

As an agricultural service provider, you are not expected to know all the answers or be able to provide information to every prospective or beginning farmer who contacts you. But you do have a responsibility to direct them toward the most helpful and useful sources of information and assistance.

To make an effective referral requires:

- good communications skills
- knowledge of types of referrals to resources, programs and services
- a solid understanding of the referral process

#### **Hone your Communication Skills**

Three basic communication skills are essential for making effective referrals:

1. Listening
2. Questioning
3. Clarifying and reflecting

Listening, asking questions, and clarifying and reflecting back what is said, all help bring issues into focus for the caller. And you can better determine what services need to be provided and by whom.

Of course, good verbal skills help you to communicate your intent and your information to the caller. The quality of communication lies in how you begin the conversation. The best approach is to begin with a statement that encourages the caller to share information.

**Example:** “Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_, how may I help you?”

“Thanks for calling me. Tell me what’s going on.”

*These statements invite conversation and allow the new farmer to begin talking about his or her situation and/or ask questions.*

## Listening

After you have asked your opening question, listen. It is one of the most important, but often overlooked, skills of communication. To listen effectively you must focus your attention on what is being said without interruption.

**Example:** *Small verbal cues such as “I see,” or a simple “hmm” or “un-huh” during pauses lets the farmer know you are attentive. They encourage the person to continue. Avoid interruptions, even if you feel they are helpful. Saying, “I know what you mean” or “I’ve heard that before” are barriers to communication and convey assumptions that the farmer might take as a cue to stop talking.*

## Questioning

During your conversation, encourage the caller to give you as much information as possible in order to provide appropriate help. To do this, you will need to ask questions. Certain types of questions are more effective in eliciting information than others. Generally ask open-ended questions, or ones that do not ask for just ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers. A question such as “Did New Farmer Bank handle your credit package?” is close-ended. It will elicit a simple yes or no.

**Example:** “Can you tell me more about your specific situation?”

“Can you tell me more about your credit needs?”

These questions encourage elaboration and reflection while allowing you to get clarification and gather relevant information. Phrasing questions in an open-ended format may take a little practice, but the quality of information received in return is worth the effort.

Being familiar with what services new farmers need at various stages will help you ask better questions when talking with the farmer on how to best help.

## Clarifying/Reflecting Back

Each new farmer’s situation is unique. You can’t assume that you understand, so you must clarify or check in with the caller to ensure that you do. Here are two techniques to do this:

1. Reflecting. You listen to what is being said and make a statement that summarizes the content. It helps new farmers know that they have been understood.

**Example:** “Let me see if I understand you correctly. You just said that you are concerned you don’t have an optimal feeding plan for your dairy heifers. Tell me if this is correct.”

2. Clarifying. This technique helps you to understand the situation better. In the process of clarifying, you check back with the farmer to clear up vague and misunderstood, but important, information.

**Example:** *Focus on things you do not understand. “Help me to understand what is not working with your accounting practices.”*

*“Tell me again how management decisions are made on the farm.”*

It is hard to gather the relevant information to make an effective referral without using the skills of clarifying and reflecting back.

## Types of Referrals

There are basically two types of referrals you will make:

- Direct referrals
- Research referrals

1. **Direct Referral.** These are services you are able to direct the new farmer to without further research on your part. You may know this data from networking or keeping your own database of referral sources. Referrals may be to a person, an agency, organization or a resource such as a publication or a website.

With this type of referral, you can quickly provide the farmer with the pertinent information for his or her follow up. Information such as the name of the agency or organization, contact person, phone number, location, hours, brochure sent, website address, etc. Direct referrals are made primarily to people, organizations or agencies and to websites. Referrals to people may include farmers, agency or organization service providers. Referrals to a website will require the farmer caller to do some research on their own, but often a useful website is a significant source of information and can be a great referral.

A direct referral does not necessarily lead to the "end answer". But it does provide the inquirer with a solid next step in his or her search. For example, you may receive a call from someone who is looking for specific production information to start a farm operation. You don't know the answer, but you do know an Extension educator who might have relevant information. You may make a referral to this source because you believe that he or she can provide the caller with additional information and another referral. You direct your caller to this person. The Extension educator may or may not be able to answer the questions, and also further refer your caller to a publication, website or another provider.

These are also helpful referrals. Often prospective and start-up farmers are not familiar with traditional agricultural organizations and so making a referral that may seem obvious to an organization that is very familiar to established farmers is a significant source of information. If you are not able to identify any source of help, then state that as well.

With some direct referrals, it might be a good to call the referral source first to present the farmer's scenario without using names. Ask if the source can help, especially if you have not been in contact with the referral source in sometime. This is also an opportunity to make sure your information is correct and up-to-date.

Try to avoid making "dead end" referrals. Referrals that may not lead anywhere for a number of reasons: The source does not deal with the issue, does not cover the farmer's geographic region, the program or service was eliminated, the referral is not relevant to the needs of the farmer caller or there may be specific eligibility requirements. These referrals are frustrating and may damage your relationship with the caller and certainly may discourage the new farmer in his or her pursuits.

**2. Research Referral.** At times you won't know the most appropriate referral without doing some research. Be direct with the new farmer, telling the person that you are not able to offer the best information or referral and need to do some research to identify appropriate possibilities. Tell the farmer approximately how long it will take you to do this and when you will get back in touch with him or her either by phone, mail or email. Mailing information is a useful and efficient method of making a referral. It also guarantees that the caller has the contact information and perhaps a summary of the organizations services and programs to review before they make contact.

Your research may involve searching the Internet or databases, or contacting organizations and agencies. When calling another person to uncover appropriate assistance, give the details of the situation, respect the farmer's confidentiality and ask if the agency can help.

### **The Referral Process: Tips for Making Effective Referrals**

- **Inform yourself about what is available in your community, region and state that is applicable to the service needs of perspective and beginning farmers.** As a service provider, you are aware of various services but it's important to continue to network with other service providers by attending meetings, conferences and working collaboratively on projects. Collect business cards and brochures and use these resources to update your information and referral system.
- **Create a useful and accessible information and referral system.** Develop a system for cataloging information on possible referral sources. Referral sources can be organizations, people, publications or websites that you would "refer" or direct a new farmer to for more information or to get questions answered that they have. Your information and referral system can be made up of a combination of things such as a computer database, website directories, printed directories, file folders, or a Rolodex. Often your information and referral system will include both hard copy and computer-based information sources.

The most important feature of a system is that it is accessible when you need it and is kept up to date. It needs to provide the information required to pass along to the new farmer: the organization or agency name, services offered, telephone numbers, contact persons and region served. If you are referring the inquirer to a resource such as a publication, provide accurate information about how to locate or obtain it.

A useful directory (hard copy and on the web) to begin with is the Growing New Farmers Directory of Programs and Services for Northeast New Farmers [www.northeastnewfarmer.org](http://www.northeastnewfarmer.org)

- **Know your limits.** Under most circumstances, we really want to help the person in front of us or on the other end of the phone. However, if the program, information or service we offer is not the best match for the problem or question presented, it makes sense to make a referral.
- When talking to prospective and beginning farmers, **pay particular attention to their expressed and implied informational needs.** A caller may be focused on one particular need and in the course of the conversation you see other needs that can be addressed by

agencies or organizations you know of. Share what you see and offer the referrals for the callers follow up.

- **Do your best to locate the best referral(s).** Remember that dead end useless referrals are frustrating. You may have to do some research first before providing a referral.
  - **Explain the referral.** Explain the reason for making the referral to the inquirer. Tell the new farmer what experience or knowledge you have about the referral source. Explain the services that the inquirer can obtain from the resource person or organization he or she is being referred to. Personalize the referral by giving the name of a contact person (if possible) and phone number. Prepare the farmer to discuss his or her situation and to write down questions that he or she has before calling.
- **Don't make promises or guarantees.**

As a service provider, you help new farmers in many ways. Making effective referrals is an essential part of helping.

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