



# Regional Storytelling as Food System Infrastructure

## A Practitioner White Paper

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*Reflecting on the Grow. Eat. Play. project, implemented in partnership with Healthy Harvest of North Iowa and supported by the USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program*

# Executive Summary

Grow. Eat. Play. was developed to address a persistent challenge in food systems: while Iowa has strong producers and growing consumer interest, many eaters lack a sense of regional identity and pride in the food produced around them, especially outside of peak farmers market season.

Funded through USDA's Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP), Grow. Eat. Play. was intentionally designed not as a short-term marketing campaign, but as regional storytelling infrastructure: shared tools, narratives, and distribution channels operating within a defined, place-based region. In North Iowa, this region encompassed a nine-county foodshed, sized to reflect shared agricultural conditions, markets, and community networks while remaining small enough to feel familiar and relevant to residents.

Through coordinated newsletters, seasonal recipes, blogs, visual storytelling, and directory integration, the project worked to normalize regional food as part of everyday life by consistently pairing stories with clear pathways to action. Emphasis was placed on equitable producer visibility, accessible design, authentic regional imagery, and organic audience growth. Monthly, theme-based newsletters emerged as the most effective engagement tool, enabling hyper-local content to connect recipes, producers, and purchasing pathways within a single, trusted channel.

This paper reflects on the Grow. Eat. Play. approach, key lessons learned, and the conditions that supported its success. It argues that regional storytelling infrastructure, when anchored by trusted community organizations and supported by shared tools, offers a scalable and complementary model for strengthening food systems alongside statewide initiatives. Most importantly, the project demonstrates that culture change is built through repetition, relevance, and regional connection, not one-time promotions.

This project was developed and implemented in partnership with Healthy Harvest of North Iowa through USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program funding.

## About the Author

Mallory DeVries is a small-scale poultry farmer, writer, and communications consultant based in Iowa. Through her business, TinyPlot Communications, she served as the contracted lead for the Grow. Eat. Play. project, guiding its development and implementation. As a producer operating within the region where the project was implemented, her work reflects direct experience with the realities of producer visibility, market access, and consumer engagement. Her practice focuses on culture-change strategies that strengthen food systems over time.

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## How to Use This Paper

This paper is intended as a learning resource rather than a formal evaluation or compliance report. It reflects observed patterns and implementation lessons from the Grow. Eat. Play. project that may be useful to funders, agencies, and local food system practitioners.

For USDA and partner agencies, this paper may inform program design that prioritizes repeatable storytelling systems and long-term regional capacity. For regional and local organizations, it offers a flexible model for building regional food identity and year-round visibility using shared tools and trusted local leadership.

This paper is not a prescriptive blueprint. Instead, it presents one adaptable approach to regional storytelling infrastructure that can be modified to fit different contexts, capacities, and regions.

# Background & Context

Prior to the launch of Grow. Eat. Play., local food marketing efforts in Iowa were largely fragmented and uneven. While producers, farmers markets, and regional organizations worked hard to promote local food, many outreach strategies focused heavily on peak-season visibility, in-person events, or individual businesses rather than on building a shared sense of regional food identity.

Earlier programs such as Buy Fresh Buy Local provided important groundwork, particularly in normalizing the idea of local food purchasing. However, over time these efforts became increasingly difficult to sustain. The branding and materials associated with these programs were costly, less adaptable to digital platforms, and often disconnected from ongoing community-led storytelling. Additionally, much of the visibility centered on farmers markets, offering limited year-round presence and minimal engagement beyond market season.

When Grow. Eat. Play. began, Iowa did not yet have a coordinated statewide local food marketing initiative comparable to today's Choose Iowa program. In the absence of a statewide framework, regional organizations were left to develop their own approaches often with limited resources.

Even as statewide efforts have since expanded, a persistent gap remains: **statewide branding alone cannot create the regional pride, familiarity, and trust that influence everyday food choices.** Consumers are more likely to engage when food feels connected to their place, their producers, and their seasonal rhythms. Without that sense of regional belonging, local food risks being perceived as occasional, seasonal, or niche rather than as a normal part of daily life.

Grow. Eat. Play. emerged in response to this challenge. Rather than replacing statewide initiatives, the project sought to complement them by strengthening regional storytelling capacity through infrastructure that local organizations could use to consistently reflect their communities back to themselves and reinforce local food as a shared cultural asset.

# Key Terms & Concepts

**Access-Oriented Storytelling:** Storytelling that connects inspiration directly to actionable pathways, such as directories, recipes, or producer listings, making it easier for consumers to act.

**Culture Change:** A gradual shift in habits and norms related to food purchasing and preparation, built through consistent engagement over time.

**Equitable Visibility:** An approach to promotion that ensures participating producers and their product categories receive balanced exposure over time, regardless of size or marketing capacity.

**Owned Communication Channels:** Distribution platforms controlled by an organization, such as email newsletters or websites, that allow for consistent messaging without reliance on algorithm-driven social media.

**Region:** A defined geographic area with shared agricultural conditions, markets, and community networks. In this context, the region is a nine-county area in North Central Iowa, sized to support shared storytelling while maintaining a clear sense of place.

**Regional Food Identity:** The sense of familiarity, pride, and connection consumers feel toward food produced in their own region, shaped through repeated exposure and relevance rather than isolated events.

**Regional Storytelling Infrastructure:** The systems, tools, and practices that allow local food stories to be told consistently over time within a specific region.

**Story (in this context):** A structured, thematic unit of content used to communicate how a regional food system functions over time. Stories are not individual anecdotes, but recurring topics that reflect regional producers, markets, seasonality, and purchasing pathways.

**Seasonality:** Aligning storytelling, recipes, and outreach with what is actually available locally throughout the year, including storage crops and winter production.

# The Grow. Eat. Play. Approach

Grow. Eat. Play. focused on building shared systems that support consistent, regional storytelling over time rather than one-off promotions or short-term campaigns. The approach emphasized access-oriented storytelling, meaning **every piece of content included a clear, direct path to action**, such as linking recipes directly to nearby farms.

Rather than prioritizing reach or visibility alone, the project focused on repetition, relevance, and ease of participation for both consumers and producers. The goal was to make local food feel familiar, accessible, and part of everyday decision-making.

The project was intentionally designed to be:

- Regionally grounded, reflecting local growing conditions, markets, and community rhythms
- Lightweight and replicable, using shared tools and templates rather than custom-built platforms
- Complementary, not competitive, with broader statewide branding and promotion efforts

This approach recognized that while statewide initiatives play an important role in awareness and legitimacy, regional efforts are often better positioned to translate that awareness into familiarity and habit. Operating at a regional scale allowed content to align with what was actually available, visible, and meaningful to local audiences throughout the year.

Rather than centering individual farms as the primary unit of storytelling, Grow. Eat. Play. emphasized the regional food system as a whole. This reduced pressure on individual producers to self-promote and helped ensure that visibility was distributed more equitably across participating members.

While Grow. Eat. Play. was initially developed within a nine-county region in North Iowa, the approach was intentionally designed to be transferable. Shared tools, templates, and workflows developed through the project have since been adopted by at least one additional region, with several others actively exploring implementation. This early uptake suggests that regional storytelling infrastructure can be adapted across different geographies while remaining grounded in local leadership and context.

The following components formed the backbone of this approach.

### **NEWSLETTERS AS CORE INFRASTRUCTURE**

Email newsletters emerged as the most effective and durable storytelling tool within the project. As an owned communication channel, email marketing provided a reliable way to reach an engaged audience without dependence on social media algorithms, platform volatility, or ongoing paid advertising.

Monthly, theme-based newsletters allowed content to be:

- Seasonally relevant
- Hyper-local to the region's offerings
- Directly connected to recipes, producers, and events

For example, a January newsletter organized around the theme “Hearty Resolutions” connected New Year’s resolutions to small, manageable habit shifts toward regional food, pairing easy soup recipes with links to nearby producers offering winter-available ingredients.

**This format supported habit-building by meeting readers at a predictable cadence and reinforcing regional food as part of everyday decision-making.** Over time, the newsletter became the primary space where regional food identity was reinforced consistently and clearly.

## **RECIPES AS A CULTURAL CONNECTOR**

Recipes were intentionally positioned as a bridge between storytelling and action. Rather than serving as static content, recipes functioned as practical tools that helped consumers understand how to use local food in real, everyday contexts.

Recipes were organized around seasons and ingredients, which reduced intimidation around cooking local food and reinforced familiarity with regional products. Each recipe linked directly to ingredient-specific directory results, allowing readers to find farms and food businesses offering those products near them. This ensured that inspiration was consistently paired with clear, local pathways to purchase.

This approach emphasized practicality over novelty, helping local food feel normal and accessible rather than exceptional or niche.

## **SHARED DIRECTORY INFRASTRUCTURE AS AN ACCESS TOOL**

Access-oriented storytelling depends on reliable, up-to-date pathways from content to action. In practice, this requires shared directory infrastructure that allows consumers to find regional producers easily while minimizing administrative burden for farms and food businesses.

Rather than creating new or duplicative databases, Grow. Eat. Play. relied on a shared directory system, MarketMaker, that enabled producers to maintain a single profile while appearing across multiple regional and statewide directories. This approach reduced producer fatigue, improved data accuracy, and helped keep information current without ongoing manual updates from regional organizations.

Shared directory infrastructure also supports ingredient-based filtering, which is essential for connecting storytelling to action. When recipes or seasonal content highlighted a specific ingredient, consumers could follow links directly to nearby producers offering that product, creating a clear path from inspiration to purchase.

MarketMaker, a national food system mapping tool, functioned effectively as this shared infrastructure within the project. By allowing producers to control their own profiles and affiliate with multiple regions, the platform reduced duplication and supported regional collaboration. Importantly, the platform is free for producers to use, removing a common barrier to participation and helping ensure broad, equitable inclusion. While other tools may serve this role in different contexts, the underlying principle remains the same: shared, interoperable directories are critical infrastructure for regional food systems.

### **EQUITABLE VISIBILITY AND ACCESSIBLE DESIGN**

To maintain trust and participation, the approach prioritized equitable visibility across producers. Each participating member received comparable exposure over time, with timing aligned to seasonal availability.

Design choices favored clarity and accessibility over complexity. Templates were created to be easily reused or adapted by other regions, ensuring that the approach could scale without requiring specialized marketing capacity. Professional photography and video were used strategically to establish visual consistency and credibility, while remaining grounded in real places and people.

### **ORGANIC GROWTH OVER PAID PROMOTION**

Rather than investing heavily in paid advertising, the project emphasized organic growth built through consistency and relevance. This decision reflected a belief that culture change is more effectively driven by repetition than by reach alone.

By focusing on trusted channels and familiar formats, the project demonstrated that sustained engagement can be built without significant ongoing advertising costs.

## **REPLICABLE BY DESIGN**

Grow. Eat. Play. was intentionally designed to be replicable across regions without losing local identity. Shared visual standards, templates, and messaging frameworks allowed each region to adopt the model quickly while maintaining a consistent, recognizable look and feel.

Regional badges (e.g., Grow. Eat. Play. North Iowa, Grow. Eat. Play. Cedar Valley) reinforced both cohesion and local ownership. This balance made the campaign easy to recognize across regions while remaining grounded in place.

By reducing the creative and technical lift required to launch, the model lowered barriers to adoption and allowed regional organizations to focus on relationships, storytelling, and engagement rather than branding or platform development.

Replicability was treated as a core design principle, not an afterthought, enabling the approach to scale while remaining regionally rooted.

# Recommendations

The Grow. Eat. Play. project suggests that increasing local food engagement is less about convincing people and more about making local food visible, familiar, and easy to choose. The following recommendations reflect observed patterns from implementation and are intended to inform future regional and statewide local food promotion efforts. Collectively, these recommendations point toward a model that prioritizes organizing food promotion at the regional level, supported by shared tools and long-term systems, rather than isolated campaigns.

**1. Build belonging, not just awareness:** Local food engagement increases when messaging reinforces a sense of regional identity and pride. Storytelling that reflects local landscapes, seasons, and people helps consumers feel connected to their food system, not simply informed about it. Programs should prioritize narratives that foster belonging over campaigns focused solely on education or promotion.

**2. Design for repetition, not persuasion:** Most consumers already understand the value of local food. What influences behavior is repeated exposure through familiar formats. Consistent messaging over time helps local food feel routine rather than exceptional. Effective efforts emphasize steady, predictable engagement rather than one-time promotional pushes.

**3. Make action easy and immediate:** Convenience is often a larger barrier than cost. When storytelling is directly connected to clear access points, such as linking recipe ingredients to nearby producers, consumers are more likely to act. Programs should reduce guesswork and simplify the path from interest to purchase.

**4. Maintain year-round visibility:** Local food is often perceived as seasonal, even when many products are available year-round. Highlighting storage crops, meat, eggs, honey, maple syrup, and indoor production helps counter this perception. Maintaining visibility across seasons supports more consistent engagement and reinforces local food as a reliable, everyday option.

**5. Treat owned communication channels as core infrastructure:** Email newsletters proved to be the most effective tool for sustained engagement. Owned platforms allow for deeper storytelling, clearer calls to action, and consistent delivery without reliance on algorithms or paid advertising. Programs should treat newsletters and websites as foundational infrastructure, not supplemental outreach tools.

**6. Set clear and equitable participation expectations for producers:** Equitable visibility builds trust and reduces pressure on producers to self-promote. Clear guidelines around participation and timing help ensure involvement feels supportive rather than competitive. Programs should prioritize fairness and transparency to encourage broad participation.

**7. Use shared tools to reduce administrative burden:** Relying on existing platforms and shared creative assets minimizes duplication and reduces burnout for both producers and organizations. Where possible, efforts should align around shared tools that allow information to flow across regions and initiatives.

**8. Plan for incremental culture change:** Behavior change rarely results from a single interaction. Small, repeated touchpoints accumulate over time, gradually shifting expectations and habits. Programs should be designed with patience and longevity in mind, recognizing that impact grows through consistency.

**9. Adopt a shared directory infrastructure:** Programs seeking to improve local food access and visibility should prioritize directory tools that are free to producers, interoperable across regions, and easily integrated into consumer-facing content such as recipes and newsletters. MarketMaker functioned effectively as this shared infrastructure by enabling ingredient-based filtering, regional affiliations, and consistent linking across content. By allowing producers to maintain control of a single profile across multiple regions, the platform reduced duplication, minimized administrative burden, and lowered barriers to participation.

## **10. Align statewide efforts with regional storytelling infrastructure:**

Statewide promotion efforts are strengthened when paired with regional partners who maintain accurate data, support producer readiness, and reinforce place-based storytelling. Regional organizations with boots-on-the-ground relationships are well positioned to keep directories current, reduce duplication, and create clear pathways for producers to scale into broader markets. Aligning statewide branding with regional storytelling infrastructure helps ensure visibility efforts translate into trust, familiarity, and sustained participation.

### **Implications for State and Federal Programs**

The Grow. Eat. Play. project suggests that regional storytelling infrastructure can serve as a durable, complementary layer within broader state and federal local food initiatives. While statewide programs support visibility and coordination, regional systems are often better positioned to translate awareness into familiarity, trust, and everyday behavior.

For USDA and partner agencies, this highlights the value of funding models that prioritize shared systems, repeatable workflows, and long-term regional capacity over one-time deliverables. Investments in owned communication channels, shared directory tools, and regional coordination can extend the reach of federal programs without requiring uniform messaging or centralized control.

Supporting trusted regional organizations as stewards of storytelling infrastructure allows local food promotion to remain grounded in place while aligning with broader policy and program goals. This approach offers a scalable pathway for strengthening local food systems while respecting regional identity, producer autonomy, and administrative capacity.

# Conclusion

Local food systems are strengthened not only by production and access, but by the **systems that help communities see, access, and value their food** over time. Grow. Eat. Play. was designed to address this need by investing in regional storytelling infrastructure that supports consistent, place-based engagement.

The project shows how regional approaches can complement statewide efforts by translating broad awareness into familiarity and habit. Through repeatable tools such as newsletters, recipes, shared creative assets, and directory integration, Grow. Eat. Play. helped normalize local food as part of everyday life while respecting producer autonomy and minimizing administrative burden.

This experience underscores the value of region-focused initiatives rooted in place, relationships, and lived expertise. State and federal programs are well positioned to support this work by investing in organizations already operating on the ground who understand the rhythms, challenges, and opportunities of their local food systems.

As USDA and its partners continue to invest in local food promotion, the Grow. Eat. Play. project suggests that **the most durable outcomes come from funding repeatable systems and regional capacity that make food systems visible, accessible, and familiar through consistent, place-based engagement.** When trusted local organizations are supported as long-term stewards of storytelling infrastructure, culture change becomes possible through relevance, repetition, and connection.

Grow. Eat. Play. offers a scalable, adaptable model for food system investment that is grounded in community and built for longevity.