

# The farm-based entrepreneur's marketing mix: a case study from the local food sector

## Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper explores the market creation practices of farm-based entrepreneurs in the local food sector. Alternative marketing channels for farm-based products increase, but we do not know how entrepreneurs work to position their products in the marketplace. By expanding on the research of farm-based entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial marketing (EM), this study explores the entrepreneurial practices which farm-based entrepreneurs employ through the lens of the entrepreneurial marketing mix (EMM) and its constituent dimensions: *person, purpose, practices* and *process*.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The study employs a multiple case study design and follows a phenomenological approach in conducting in-depth retrospective interviews with 11 successful farm-based entrepreneurs in the local food sector in Norway.

**Findings:** The thematic analysis revealed four key EM practices of the study's farm-based entrepreneurs: *transferring the farm or transforming the farm as the primary purpose; legitimising a local brand through uniqueness of person, purpose and place; using a personal networking approach in the market development process* and *flexible and controllable market expansion practices*. These elements constitute the pillars of successful, creative and resource efficient market development.

**Originality:** The study represents a pioneering attempt to explore and conceptualise EM within farm-based entrepreneurship. Our findings ultimately give rise to a novel framework: the farm-based entrepreneur's marketing mix (FEMM).

**Keywords:** farm-based entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial marketing, entrepreneurial marketing mix, local food, micro-business

**Paper Type:** Research paper

## Introduction

This paper explores the market creation practices of farm-based entrepreneurs in the local food sector. In doing so, we intend to enhance our understanding of farm-based entrepreneurship from an entrepreneurial marketing (EM) perspective. Seminal research contributions within this particular journal have highlighted the fit between the entrepreneurial process and marketing (Kraus *et al.*, 2012; Lehman *et al.*, 2014; Montiel-Campos, 2018; Haden *et al.*, 2016; Solé, 2013), developing EM into a prosperous field and motivating further understanding of entrepreneurship as a market development process.

Following this line of inquiry, the EM literature reveals that marketing in start-ups and small businesses is often creative and leverages a scarce resource base (Fillis, 2010; Gaddefors and Anderson; 2008; Morris *et al.*, 2002). In this respect, farm-based entrepreneurs specialise in the creative transformation of their local resources into a higher market value, creating unique benefits from their particular context (Alsos *et al.*, 2003; Alsos *et al.*, 2014; Müller and Korsgaard, 2018), representing an interesting context for EM studies. Farm-based businesses in the local food sector are often connecting directly with consumers to fit their capacities and abilities; they also co-create with other producers to solve marketing challenges through networking and regional branding (Haugum and Grande, 2017). In the niche market of local food, the market development endeavour is particularly challenging, as these businesses must uniquely position themselves in non-local, constrained market channels dominated by larger actors and food companies (Abate-Kassa and Peterson, 2011; Harris and Deacon, 2011; Haugum and Grande, 2017).

Originally grounded in restrictions in the form of policy, quotas and seasonal fluctuations, the agricultural industry has experienced increased growth in entrepreneurial farm diversification, as farms generate value besides agriculture (Alsos *et al.*, 2003; Alsos *et al.*, 2011; Vik and McElwee, 2011). Farm-based entrepreneurship has therefore become an important stream of research (Alsos *et al.*, 2011; Dias *et al.*, 2019). In parallel, the interest in alternative marketing channels for farm-based products is increasing (Dias *et al.*, 2019; Haugum and Grande, 2017), but we do not know how entrepreneurs work in entrepreneurial ways to position their products in the marketplace. Furthermore, the initial motivation for utilising the farm for entrepreneurial purposes may vary between the entrepreneurs (Alsos *et al.*, 2003; Vik and McElwee, 2011), and is largely dependent on the founder-managers' connections and previous careers. Thus, the farm-based entrepreneur's initial motivations as drivers of the market creation process warrants further attention; they have yet to be explored through the lens of EM.

Unlike larger businesses, small and resource-constrained businesses rely on the marketing skills and strategies of their founder-managers to succeed (Fillis, 2010; Franco *et al.*, 2014; Hills and Hultman, 2013). Founder-managers of micro-businesses employ unconventional marketing practices to establish a unique place in markets (Gaddefors and Anderson; 2008; Martin, 2009; Morrish, 2011; Zontanos and Anderson, 2004), typically without relying on conventional planning or marketing frameworks, such as the 4 P's of Kotler and Keller (2011):

product, price, place and promotion of goods and services. Instead, small-business owners rely on available resources, integrated into their entrepreneurial marketing mix (EMM) (Martin, 2009), and configured into interactive, informal practices when entering the market (Carson *et al.*, 1995; Fillis, 2010; Franco *et al.*, 2014; Kubberød *et al.*, 2019; Stokes, 2000; Zontanos and Anderson, 2004). Little is known about how this market creation process operationalises into the daily practices of farm-based micro-businesses and how the underlying practices lead to success in the marketplace. Against this backdrop, we seek to enhance our further understanding of the market creation practices of the farm-based entrepreneur within a particular market, a hitherto under-investigated area in EM research. To do this, we draw upon another set of 4 P's, from Zontanos and Anderson (2004): person, purpose, practices and process, later conceptualised as the EMM by Martin (2009). The EMM framework is rarely adopted by EM researchers, and in an effort to understand the market creation practices within a particular context, we will adopt the elements of EMM to contribute to the development of a practice-related framework. We employ a multiple case study design and follow a phenomenological approach to conduct in-depth retrospective interviews with 11 farm-based, entrepreneurs in the local food sector, successful in both their local and their non-local market channels in Norway.

Our research was guided by the following research question:

*What particular practices have led to the farm-based entrepreneurs' success in the markets they operate, and how do the entrepreneur's initial motivations influence the market creation process?*

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: First, we review the literature on farm-based entrepreneurship and EM, situating our research and developing our theoretical framework. We then outline our methodology, analysis and findings, and we discuss these in light of the literature. We conclude by stating our contribution and suggesting implications of our study.

## **Theoretical framework**

### ***Farm-based resources and entrepreneurial motivations***

The decision to become a farm-based entrepreneur is driven by socio-cultural motives such as generating consistent income from the farm, ensuring family farm survival and maintaining self-employed freedom (Alsos *et al.*, 2003; Alsos *et al.*, 2011). Some entrepreneurs are lifestyle entrepreneurs (Marcketti *et al.*, 2006): owner-founder-managers who begin a farm-based business as a lifestyle strategy, following their values and passions rather than seeking to maximise profits and growth (Müller and Korsgaard, 2018). The network, experience and knowledge gained by farm-based entrepreneurs through traditional agriculture are important resources for developing opportunities (Alsos *et al.*, 2003; Haugum and Grande, 2017).

Farm-based entrepreneurs may also be founder-managers less strongly attached to their farms, having returned to family farms (Gaddefors and Cronsell, 2009) with ambitions to transform their original land and its resources into unique and new offerings. Farm-based entrepreneurs are here typically motivated to combine their farm-based resources and experiences with those from careers outside their farms (Alsos *et al.*, 2003). In their empirical study, Alsos *et al.* (2003)

found that farm-based entrepreneurs have three primary motivations for their entrepreneurial activities: continuing the farm, maximising their unique set of resources, and exploring opportunity-centred ideas. In this study, we investigate how such motivations influence the market development process. Hence, the initial motivation of farm-based entrepreneurs is essential for developing both local and non-local markets.

### ***Entrepreneurial marketing: a framework for understanding farm-based entrepreneurship***

The concept of entrepreneurial marketing (EM) is multifaceted (Haden *et al.*, 2016; Kraus *et al.*, 2012; Montiel-Campos, 2018; Solé, 2013), but many researchers have suggested that EM practices are more co-creative and proactive than the traditional marketing practices of large corporations and marketing managers (Fillis, 2010; Gaddefors and Anderson, 2008; Martin, 2009; Morris *et al.*, 2002). When managers of local small businesses enter new non-local markets, they often lack experience (Kubberød *et al.*, 2019) and have limited knowledge about existing market conditions, but they can create a market by employing their locally acquired resources (Read *et al.*, 2009; Sarasvathy, 2001; Sarasvathy and Dew, 2005). In this paper, we investigate how farm-based entrepreneurs create local and non-local market channels by leveraging their own personal resources.

Zontanos and Anderson (2004) claimed that successful marketing in small firms is tied to the founder-manager's actions and daily contacts. Subsequent scholars have questioned how the classical 4 P's framework (Porter, 1980) applies to and aligns with entrepreneurs (Fillis, 2010; Gaddefors and Anderson, 2008; Ismail *et al.*, 2018; Martin, 2009; Schindehutte *et al.*, 2009). We thus revise and fit the 4 P's to the EMM (Martin, 2009; Zontanos and Anderson, 2004; Kubberød *et al.*, 2019) and employ this broad framework to explore entrepreneurial practices from the perspective of a farm-based founder-manager's market development. This EM framework delineates the four elements of person, purpose, practices and process to explore how marketing routines emerge in entrepreneurial small businesses (Zontanos and Anderson, 2004). Next, we describe the elements of the EMM and their relevance to our research.

#### *Person*

Founder-managers of small firms tend to be central to and influential in all firm-level activities (Simsek *et al.*, 2015). However, founder-managers often are not marketing experts and have limited understanding of marketing frameworks (Stokes, 2000; Martin, 2009). They instead possess domain-specific expertise, such as farming expertise (Alsos *et al.*, 2003; Alsos *et al.*, 2011). Also, they value personal promotion of their products (Haugum and Grande, 2017), despite not considering this as marketing (Zontanos and Anderson, 2004). Scholars emphasise that such a personal impact and relational capability are resources in EM (Morrish *et al.*, 2010). To further understand the farm-based entrepreneur (McElwee, 2008; Vik and McElwee, 2011), we explore who the farm-based entrepreneurs are and how they use their background to move into the marketplace.

#### *Purpose*

Evidence suggests that underlying purpose drives marketing efforts (Martin, 2009; Morris *et al.*, 2002) and is important for marketing success (Laaksonen *et al.*, 2011). Because small firms

are often characterised by strong entrepreneurial leadership (Koryak *et al.*, 2015), the entrepreneur's own aspirations are operationalised through their communication and marketing efforts (Martin, 2009; Zontanos and Anderson, 2004). As indicated, farm-based entrepreneurs can have various motivations for their farms in the entrepreneurial process (Alsos *et al.*, 2003). These motivations serve a purpose and are a valuable resource for founder-managers in the market development process.

### *Practices*

Small and micro food companies with limited influence on larger market conditions can become more creative and foster new opportunities and resource configurations that derive unique benefits from their local smallness (Jones and Rowley, 2011; Korsgaard *et al.*, 2015; Müller and Korsgaard, 2018). Research on EM converges on informal, personal and creative ways of entering the marketplace (Gilmore *et al.*, 2001; Hill and Wright, 2000), where entrepreneurs know their customers personally and often co-create with them (Kubberød *et al.*, 2019; Zontanos and Anderson, 2004). Stokes (2000) found that successful entrepreneurs focus first on product development and then on customers through a bottom-up process without relying on tools such as classical market segmentation. Hills *et al.* (2008) found that, unlike larger marketing and strategic firms, EM firms tend to be tactically flexible and adaptive, preferring hands-on experience to formal marketing research. These entrepreneurs leverage themselves and their personal resources in new and creative ways to promote their company (Kubberød *et al.*, 2019; Martin, 2009). In this research, we investigate the daily practices underlying the farm-based entrepreneur's market development of their products.

### *Process*

Because farm-based entrepreneurs must recombine and leverage their farm-based resources with other resources (Alsos *et al.*, 2003; Alsos *et al.*, 2011; Müller and Korsgaard, 2018), we argue in agreement with EM theorists Haden *et al.*, (2016): this market creations process represents an entrepreneurial challenge loaded with uncertainty (Sarasvathy and Dew, 2005), and “an entrepreneur who markets his or her business in a way that reduces uncertainty and risk and who knows how to engage in calculated risk-taking can more effectively manage risk” (Haden *et al.*, 2016; p. 115). In order to control the market development process and reduce the risk, the farm-based entrepreneurs should thus focus on who they are (background attributes related to context and ambitions), what they know (knowledge, skills and experience from both local or non-local markets), and whom they know (existing networks – both business and personal), and they should use these as resources and assets in a means-driven co-creation and networking process (Kubberød *et al.*, 2019; Sarasvathy, 2001). This is an alternative to linear marketing and planning, in which the entrepreneur relies on causal thinking and predictive strategies (Sarasvathy, 2001; Wiltbank *et al.*, 2006). In our study, we explore to what extent farm-based entrepreneurs rely on effectual and control strategies instead of causal and predictive strategies.

## **Research design and methodology**

We use a multiple case study design with a phenomenological approach because it is suitable for investigating real-life phenomena in changing contexts (Simons, 2009; Yin, 2013). We focus on the phenomenon of the market development practices of entrepreneurs developing local and non-local markets for their products, with the founder-managers representing the units of analysis. This strategy allows us to compare findings across and within units and to explore and theorise on marketing practices from a phenomenological standpoint. The case study approach therefore allows us to build new theoretical understanding, rather than formal generalisation (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

### ***The market for Norwegian farm-based foods***

Interest in the farm-based food sector is growing among Norwegian farmers because of a government policy that motivates farmers to move from traditional farming towards other farm-related sectors, such as local food (Vik and McElwee, 2011). The Norwegian local food sector has expanded rapidly in recent years, with an annual market growth of more than 5% between 2016 and 2019 and a total turnover of NOK 11.25 billion in 2019 (Matmerk, 2019). According to the Norwegian government, Government.no (2020), 70% of Norwegian consumers are willing to pay extra for local food, defined as “food and drink products with a defined origin and local identity or with distinct qualities based on recipes, processes or tradition” (Matmerk, 2019). The Norwegian food market consists of several market channels, which attracts local food entrepreneurs. The indirect and usually non-local markets include grocery stores, caterers, restaurants, hotels, and delicacy stores in cities. The grocery market is the largest and most competitive market. These non-local markets require a lot of follow-up and professionalism in building relationships between merchants and chefs. However, local markets sell products directly to consumers. In Norway, direct markets include farmers’ markets, REKO rings (Rejäl Konsumtion, a direct distribution system that uses Facebook to coordinate orders and deliveries), and the farm-based entrepreneur’s own outlets or farm-based cafés. These local and direct market channels require fewer investments and are valuable for accessing local resources and networks.

### ***Data sources, selection criteria and entrepreneur sample***

We draw on in-depth and semi-structured retrospective interviews. We first retrieved a list of about 150 businesses from Innovation Norway, which oversees the Norwegian Growth Financing Program for entrepreneurs (Innovation Norway, 2020). An expert interview approach (Neergaard, 2007) guided our sampling of interesting cases, as we sought to draw a comprehensive dataset from successful local food entrepreneurs with comprehensive market experience in local and non-local markets. This sampling process was designed to enable insights into the market creation practices of the farm-based entrepreneurs in the local food sector and to enable comparisons between cases and within cases in our analytical work (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). We contacted 14 businesses matching our selection criteria (see Table I), and of these, 11 farm-based food entrepreneurs from 10 micro-businesses located in south-eastern Norway agreed to participate in the study. Table II lists the farm-based food entrepreneurs, anonymised to ensure confidentiality.

The interviews were conducted in February 2019 at the respective farms of the founder-managers. The on-site visits provided a good contextual understanding of the individual founder-managers at home, creating a relaxing atmosphere in which they could share their experiences in product marketing.

Table I. Selection criteria for farm-based food entrepreneurs

Criteria	Description
Businesses in a phase of growth, indicating success	The farm-based food entrepreneur has received funding from The Growth Financing Program of Innovation Norway (Innovation Norway, 2020). The business is entrepreneurial and expanding into new market channels to fulfil the following criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will increase turnover by at least 30% in the next 3 years</li> <li>• Employs more than one person</li> <li>• Achieves annual turnover of 1 million NOK or more</li> </ul>
Size	Micro-businesses (< 10 employees)
Founder-manager present	The founder-manager is still present and active in all business operations.
Classified as local food	The business falls under the definition of local food (Matmerk, 2019).
Farm-based entrepreneur	The business originates from a farm (in accordance with Alsos <i>et al.</i> , 2003).
Product assortment and success	Sells more than one product, which indicates experience and success. This is because we want to examine how local and non-local networks are exploited in the market.
Market channels	Operates in local market channels and in at least two non-local market channels to ensure enough variability along important dimensions of operational practices.

Table II. Sample of entrepreneurs

Interviewed founder-manager	Core activity and products	Background	Operating market channels	
			Local	Non-local
Håvard	Egg production, desserts	Grew up on a farm but chose another career before taking over family farm; marketing background; worked many years prior to start-up; strong network from agricultural business.	Delicacy grocery store	Dominant national grocery chains, HORECA*
Kristian	Ecological apple production, apple juice, vegetable and apple mixed juices	Grew up on a farm but chose another career; non-native farm-based entrepreneur. Trained and worked in construction, studied business economics and real estate. Also a real estate entrepreneur investing in local value creation.	Farm outlet, farmers' market	Dominant national grocery chains, HORECA
Anne	Black oat production and products	No farming background but took over family farm; master's in economics and business; long business career prior to start-up.	Farm web store, farm outlet and farm café	Dominant national grocery chains, independent grocery stores
Petter	Apple and cherry production, apple and cherry juices	No farming background but took over family farm; trained and works 100% as manager in the landscaping business in addition to the farm-based business.	Farm outlet	Urban restaurants and delicacy stores
Anders	Ecological cured meat	No farming background but took over family farm; worked 15 years in art and design prior to start-up.	Farm web store, local delicacy store	Urban delicacy stores, selected national grocery chains, exclusive restaurants
Hanne	Cakes from own home bakery	No farming background; trained as chef and helicopter pilot; works as pilot and also runs the cake business from the family farm.	Farmers' market, farm outlet, selected local grocery shops, REKO**	Urban hotels, selected delicacy stores, caterers

Harald	Milk production, cheese and ice cream	Farming background, and short career in accounting prior to start-up.	Selected local grocery stores	Exclusive urban restaurants – one being a Michelin Guide restaurant, urban delicacy stores, HORECA
Ole	Egg production, ice cream	Farming background; trained in engineering and worked 11 years in the city prior to start-up.	Farm outlet and farm banqueting, Farmer's market, restaurants, cafés and selected local grocery stores, REKO	National and urban grocery chains
Marius and Silje	Raspberry production and juice	Farming backgrounds; both work 100% in an additional job.	Selected local grocery stores, REKO	Urban restaurants, cafés and hotels
Mari	Milk production and cheese	Farming background	Farm outlet, farmers' market, selected local grocery stores	Selected national and urban grocery chains, urban restaurants and delicacy stores

\*HORECA = hotel, restaurant and canteen market

\*\*REKO = Rejäl konsumtion, a direct-sales channel based on social media.

### ***Data analysis process***

The interviews were recorded and then fully transcribed. First, we developed a broad coding scheme of the main marketing practices found in the transcripts. Second, we employed thematic analysis (Mason, 2002) by building on knowledge deduced from our broad EMM framework to identify the underlying patterns in our raw data. These patterns were categorised in relation to the *person* (background, career experience, network), *purpose* (continuing the farm, maximising unique resources, exploiting new business ideas), *practice* (promotional activities and product/market development) and *process* (effectual co-creation instead of linear marketing process). We initially analysed each interview to identify patterns and unique themes across these 4 P's. Using a process-relational perspective, we then analysed how the farm-based motivations materialised in the market development processes across the cases and within the main 4 P categories. This step in the analysis of the entrepreneur narratives uncovered four main themes of market development practices, representing the underlying interplay between the original 4 P's deduced from our theoretical framework and the patterns found inductively in the data. In the final step, we returned to the dataset and expanded the broad coding scheme to confirm that our four final themes reflected the main structures and data richness, thus building on the theoretical framework. The themes were *transferring the farm or transforming the farm as the primary purpose; legitimising a local brand through uniqueness of person, purpose and place; using a personal networking approach in the market development process and flexible and controllable market expansion practices.*



## Findings

Our study's farm-based entrepreneurs employ various practices in the process of developing markets for their unique products. We illustrate the four themes found in the thematic analysis using selected quotes from the narratives.

### *Transferring the farm or transforming the farm as the primary purpose*

Our analysis identified two primary farm-based motivations that underlie the purpose of market development: (1) the farm as the primary motivation and most important resource (the farm is *transferred* into a business that contributes to sustaining primary production while improving how available farm-based resources are used) and (2) the farm as one of several resources for seeking and exploiting new ideas (the farm is *transformed* through acquired career experience and non-local networks where the primary motivation is renewal).

In the *transferring the farm* group, we found entrepreneurs with a lifelong involvement in farming and a unique attachment to place. Marius and Silje, Harald, Ole and Mari are founder-managers who are strongly committed to the survival and continuance of their family farms. They have limited business experience but have specific local and/or farming expertise that they draw upon as their purpose when entering the market:

*Originally, I come from a dairy farm. [...] We [neighbouring farms] agreed upon a dairy farm milk cooperation. [...] [One of the partners] had an idea to try to make something new out of the milk as we already had started the dairy cooperation. So far, we had only delivered the milk, the grain, and the meat to industry companies without doing much ourselves. I found the idea intriguing [...] We entered a course [milk processing], and I realised what an incredible raw material milk is [...] So, we ended up expanding our farm and starting the business here.*  
(Mari)

This learning account shows that going against the grain is a valuable resource in its own right. Building on another purpose, such as moving away from modern farming practices, can legitimise more sustainable practices and increase profits. The entrepreneurs in this group possess unique localised knowledge derived from their long histories in farming.

In the *transforming the farm* group, we found founder-managers without farming backgrounds. Håvard, Kristian, Anne, Petter, Anders and Hanne all grew up on family farms (except for Kristian, who bought a farm) but pursued other careers. They are idea-exploiting entrepreneurs (Alsos *et al.*, 2003) who invested in the farm and employed it as one of several resources for creating new business opportunities. For their resource base, these entrepreneurs draw upon non-local business networks and general business experience. When moving into the market, they actively search outside the local market and differentiate themselves through their local uniqueness to create their purpose and achieve their goals:

*We took over the farm in 2014 and were not sure about what to do besides something like "farm-to-fork." [...] Eventually, we landed on going back to the roots where the land has been cultivated since the Viking Age. [...] At that time, it was black oats. We wanted to do something special. So, we had this unique grain and were early to launch steel-cut.* (Anne)

In the following analysis, we employ the terms *transferring the farm* and *transforming the farm* to differentiate between the initial purposes of these two groups of entrepreneurs.

### ***Legitimising a local brand through uniqueness of person, purpose and place***

The founder-managers participate in all business operations and fully control the value chain. This constitutes a unique and valuable localised resource that facilitates transparency and credibility and can be used for storytelling in the marketplace (Barney, 1991). Moreover, founder-managers speak passionately and proudly about their products and their farms, and their confidence can build market legitimacy. We analysed how the entrepreneurs leveraged this benefit to create a unique local brand, and we uncovered three patterns in brand-building practices that leveraged the distinctiveness of product stories: *using distinctive design to link a unique taste with a unique place; establishing a link between happy living animals and good quality; and using personal credibility to establish a link to exquisite taste.*

In the first branding practice, entrepreneurs communicate distinctiveness in a goal-driven manner through bold product and label designs which deviate from mainstream products. By this stand-out deliberate practice, Anders draws upon his artistic background to create unique messages and creative names for his meat products:

*So, I think it was a good thing that both my wife and I have a design and art background. [...] This meant that we quite early were able to stand out in the market; we saw what was missing in a way and what was not. [...] We somehow approached the project in the opposite direction of what I think the meat industry is doing. (Anders)*

Ole and Anne use retro designs to promote the fact that their products are locally produced in a traditional, almost homemade fashion. These two entrepreneurs have chosen to stand out from the crowd, to advertise that they come from a local place and to differentiate themselves from the mainstream products in grocery stores:

*At [a Norwegian supermarket chain] there are 15,000 items, and you need perhaps only 100 of them. The trick is to catch the attention straight away, with some help of design. We saw that some made a few mistakes. They have many good products, but the packaging is wrong and not suitable for the product they are selling. (Ole)*

In the next category of branding practices, we find that solely the *transferring the farm* entrepreneurs employing animal welfare in a bottom-up manner (Stokes, 2000) to link their purpose with superior product quality: these farmers connect the happy living animals on their farms with the superior taste of their products. To send this message, they tell stories about their background and production practices and use farm pictures and animal logos. This imprints the message of “the happy cow” and “the award-winning product” in customers’ minds:

*They [other dairies] tell the history of the dairy, the people or place, they talk about the milk from the Norwegian farms, but not about the cow. So, I talk about the cow. [...] They [a top Norwegian restaurant] wanted to make a story about a cow, they would trace the milk from it,*

*to see how it tasted different. [...] The cow Isrosa was the one with the best milk. And Isrosa has a good name, and a good story to why she is called Isrosa. So, we milked Isrosa in buckets and drove the milk to [a top Norwegian restaurant]. (Harald)*

The last category of branding practice represents a means-driven approach (Saravathy, 2001) in which the entrepreneurs draw upon personal experiences to build strong local brands. Brand associations should reflect the credibility of the people behind the products (Skarderud and Kubberød, 2016). In the *transforming the farm* group, Håvard is a businessman working in agriculture, and Hanne has a chef background; they both have credibility in the local food sector and use their previous careers to build legitimacy:

*It must be genuine and trustworthy, and we try to communicate that through our packaging – we are out there showing our faces, right? It should create confidence – that you tell who you are; that you dare to show your face and write who you are. (Håvard)*

Building the self into the brand has been important for Håvard and Hanne, who each appear on their product labels.

These unique local products earned distinction and awards in national and international competitions and food exhibitions, which help to build brand value (Skarderud and Kubberød, 2016). The corresponding free media coverage is also continuously promoted on the entrepreneur's websites, paving the way for local foods to enter niche markets in restaurants and supermarkets.

### ***Using a personal networking approach in the market development process***

A feature common to all cases in this study is the challenge of being a farm-based entrepreneur with a scarce resource base and working to find a place in a mature non-local food market dominated by grocery chains and large food producers. The entrepreneurs employ personal contacts and tell stories about their products, giving them control over the market development process:

*Without me, it [the products] wouldn't have been sold. I'm the one who made it, and I'm the one who travelled. If I had hired someone else, they might not have gained the same trust as me, because the one being trusted is the one who created the product. This way you gain credibility. (Harald)*

We found three patterns through which the entrepreneurs leveraged this personalised approach to mobilise their resources into developing the market: the *non-local networking approach*, the *lead user networking approach* and the *local networking approach*.

The *non-local networking approach* includes entrepreneurs from the *transforming the farm* group who possess unique local products and believe strongly in first using their non-local contacts from their previous careers (Saravathy, 2001) in the process of developing a market for their products. In the following learning account, Håvard describes how he gained direct access to a national grocery chain through his former non-local business network:

*Again – networking. The one, responsible for developing the food concept in [a Norwegian supermarket] – I knew him from before. That too was a coincidence. [...] He asked what I was doing now. “Well, we have taken over this damn farm – these chickens in cages are no good – so, I would like to do something about that,” I said. “Well, we can do that together,” he responded. So, things come “served on a silver platter” constantly, you know – so it does to everyone – and then it’s all about holding on to it or letting it go. (Håvard)*

The *lead user networking approach* includes both *transferring the farm* and *transforming the farm* entrepreneurs who approach chefs in a goal-driven manner to promote their products and create a reputation, as in the following account:

*I just made contact, hoping that since we produce high-quality products, and knowing that chefs are always looking for new things they have not tasted before, they are initially very positive when you say you have something new and exciting – at least to taste, but then they are terribly critical, so we depend on the products being good. (Anders)*

The founder-managers in the *transforming the farm* group generally harvest from non-local contacts – for example, through storytelling at urban events. They strategically utilise word of mouth from local contacts who have moved to cities to work in relevant market channels. Our findings indicate that these founders use their networks as a strategic advantage to open doors when entering national market channels.

The *local networking approach* includes entrepreneurs solely from the *transferring the farm* group; they have a stronger local attachment and in the market development process they first begin with their local contacts; local farmers’ markets, farm outlets or local cafés, to promote their products, using these as test markets before approaching larger non-local grocery chains:

*We are present in local bakery shops and cafés, some exclusive restaurants in [a local region], and we have sold to the Royal Castle – they call us now and then or send text messages – and there is the local grocery store, our best seller. Perhaps because it is local, our name is kind of known there. So, it has been kind of word-of-mouth, really, and acquaintanceship. We have gained access to some self-owned merchants. [...] At markets and such, chefs and merchants look around. We get a few orders from that. (Marius and Silje)*

Being present in local markets has also provided these entrepreneurs with word-of-mouth endorsements, which leads to new non-local contacts that can be leveraged in non-local markets (Sarasvathy, 2001).

Our findings show that the *transferring the farm* entrepreneurs learn through trial and error during their market development processes. Many of the entrepreneurs struggle to enter non-local markets because they have no external business contacts. To compensate for this, they co-created several local markets and actively employed social media channels. This strategy ultimately secured access to non-local markets through efficient digital spreading.

### ***Flexible and controllable market expansion practices***

The entrepreneurs consider their relationships with customers to be the art of small-scale marketing, representing their competitive advantage over mainstream industry actors. Inherent in this relational and flexible approach, we found three distinctive dimensions through which founder-managers expand the market for their products: *networking as market orientation*, *teaching the market through the sense of taste* and *co-creation instead of market research*. These dimensions describe the practices of both *transferring the farm* and *transforming the farm* entrepreneurs.

All entrepreneurs handled customer relations themselves and therefore had direct access to their customers' opinions. By being personally involved in promoting their products, entrepreneurs discover market trends and respond adaptively to customer needs. Furthermore, by networking at food events, festivals and competitions, entrepreneurs become relevant and expose themselves to new insights and contingencies. Our analysis reveals that alertness is employed more often than identifying the most important stakeholder (Sarasvathy, 2001).

*Networking and being present – I think that is very important. So, we spend a lot of resources and time on that. Being present in the right places to be always visible. I was at the cheese world championship even though we do not produce cheese. But the people you meet there who sell cheese probably sell cured meat too. [...] It is perhaps a bit typical when you are not born and raised within such an industry, that you lean a bit more forward and you are curious.*  
(Anders)

This quote represents a form of market orientation that favours learning about the market and customers' needs and preferences through alert networking.

The second sub-theme, *teaching the market through the sense of taste*, involves the common practice of taste demos in stores and on the entrepreneurs' farms. The entrepreneurs believe that the only way to convince customers to buy their unique products is through the customers' sense of taste:

*We might also send off some tastings and invite the chefs here, which they really appreciate. They need some inspiration too. [...] Then they get involved in the production and some explanation as to what's going on from A to Z. And then many people say, "I'll never complain about the price again."* (Mari)

This account reflects an efficient control strategy entrepreneurs use to justify their products' high prices while educating buyers about the superiority of their products.

The last sub-theme, *co-creation instead of market research*, reflects how entrepreneurs rely on their intuition and taste instead of waterfall product development. Most entrepreneurs make strategic choices at the farm, first consulting with partners or family members, and then involving non-local lead customers such as chefs and making adjustments through co-creation. This method is more efficient and less expensive than conventional market research with end consumers:

*We cooperate much with chefs, so we send test batches to the chefs and get their feedback on what they think. Then we have the annual edition product. We invite different chefs to help make that product. The result is that we build a close relationship with those chefs. [...] We develop ourselves as producers, because we learn new things and are tested and must invent new recipes and new ways of thinking. [...] Both sides benefit from it. (Anders)*

Involving chefs in product development provides them with a unique sense of ownership and deepens their understanding of local food production, which increases their pre-commitment (Kubberød *et al.*, 2019; Sarasvathy, 2001). The chefs become ambassadors for the products they have helped to create. The chefs also stimulate creative ideas and encourage experimentation in developing new products.

As another example of means-driven co-creation in local networks (Sarasvathy and Dew, 2005), residual raw materials from one local product become ingredients for new products for another local entrepreneur:

*Like the idea that came up during a chat at the farmers' market because we do not use the egg whites in the ice cream, just the yolk. So, we should come up with an idea to make use of the egg whites. And then there was this person [an apple must producer] who has leftovers from the apple must production that is not yet bottled, and he asked for ideas what to do with it. It was wrong to throw it away or feed it to the pigs. So, then it became the apple sorbet. (Ole)*

This exemplifies the win-win pooling of resources contributing to shared risks in the local network and value chain.

Through these three network practices, the entrepreneur's control and develop their non-local market position, and their close relationships with customers become their most important asset.

## **Discussion**

Our results demonstrate how entrepreneurial marketing (EM) can inform the market development practices of farm-based entrepreneurs, a hitherto under-researched topic in both farm-based entrepreneurship and EM. Our findings uncover two purposes for employing the farm in entrepreneurial endeavours: *transferring the farm* and *transforming the farm*. The *transferring the farm* entrepreneurs draw upon local and farm-related expertise and resources and employ a bottom-up strategy to mobilise their resources, starting from the farm instead of from a product or a business idea (Stokes, 2000). By contrast, the *transforming the farm* entrepreneurs employ farm-based and other resources in their active, goal-driven search for opportunities (Sarasvathy, 2001) outside their local context, turning their local uniqueness into an asset. Their initial purpose – at the expense of a clearly measurable market goal for their local product – nevertheless guides all entrepreneurs in their market development, reflecting a more effectual approach (Sarasvathy and Dew, 2005) to market creation.

Their inherent resource constraints mean that entrepreneurs lack the marketing budget for brand building, and their only currency is their distinctive stories that create a unique local brand. Our findings thus coincide with those of Haugum and Grande (2017), where local food producers employ local place branding. In creating their brand, the entrepreneurs localise their approach and leverage their personas, local farm-based resources, and primary purposes in three creative ways (Martin, 2009): *using distinctive design to link a unique taste with a unique place, establishing a link between happy living animals and good quality, and using personal credibility to establish a link to exquisite taste.*

The market development process is represented by three different, yet successful, approaches: the *non-local networking approach*, the *lead user approach*, and the *local networking approach*. *Non-local networking* is employed by the *transforming the farm* entrepreneurs and corresponds with the findings of Korsgaard *et al.* (2015), where in-migrant rural entrepreneurs go first to non-local markets to strategically position their products among known networks. The *lead user approach* is highly effective if the lead user (i.e. the chef) decides to endorse the product, conferring a gourmet status and offering a shortcut to brand value (Skarderud and Kubberød, 2016). The *local networking approach* is used by the *transferring the farm* group and reflects a localised means-driven approach, where the founder-managers begin locally with family and friends, who spread the word and recommend the products. This low-cost strategy corresponds with research that emphasises the importance of close ties in obtaining market recognition (Franco, *et al.*, 2014).

For our farm-based entrepreneurs, informal relationships with customers are the most crucial relationships for expanding the market for their products. This finding aligns with the EM literature that identifies personal networking as the most distinctive marketing advantage of small businesses (Jones and Rowley, 2011; Zontanos and Anderson, 2004). The first practice, *networking as market orientation*, relates to how EM processes are driven by contingencies and luck (Morris *et al.*, 2002): it is all about being in the right place at the right time and meeting people who offer valuable non-local contacts. The second practice, *teaching the market through the sense of taste*, reflects the entrepreneurs' pride and belief in the unique quality of their products. All the entrepreneurs employ the predictive practice of taste demos in stores and on their farms, where they control the market at the expense of market prediction (Wiltbank *et al.*, 2006). The last practice, *co-creation instead of market research*, reveals that entrepreneurs rely on their own experience and relationships instead of formal marketing research (Hills *et al.*, 2008; Kubberød *et al.*, 2019; Stokes, 2000). Moreover, co-creating with local peers enables entrepreneurs to capitalise on local resources (Müller and Korsgaard, 2018). Taken together, these practices constitute a flexible yet controllable market expansion strategy, where entrepreneurs co-create opportunities by relying on themselves as persons and on their closest relationships and business networks (Kubberød *et al.*, 2019; Whalen and Akaka, 2016; Yang and Gabrielsson, 2017). Figure 1 shows the structure and conceptual model of the farm-based entrepreneur's marketing mix (FEMM) that we developed from our empirical findings, illustrated through the four themes.





		PRACTICES	PROCESS	PRACTICES		
 <p><b>PERSON</b></p> <p>Local networking; farm-based experience</p> <p><b>PURPOSE</b></p>  <p>Transferring the farm as the primary purpose</p>	Flexible and controllable market expansion practices	Co-creation instead of market research	Means driven co-creation	Co-creation instead of market research	 <p><b>PERSON</b></p> <p>Non-local networking; business experience</p> <p><b>PURPOSE</b></p>  <p>Transferring the farm as the primary purpose</p>	
		Teaching the market through the sense of taste	Own experience first then adjustments through co-creation	Teaching the market through the sense of taste		
		Networking as market orientation	Non-predictive control strategy	Networking as market orientation		
	Using a personal networking approach in the market development process	Lead user networking approach	Alertness to contingencies	Lead user networking approach		
		The local networking approach	Direct access to customer' opinions	The non-local networking approach		
			Use local contacts first for access			Use non-local contacts first for access
	Legitimising a local brand through uniqueness of person, purpose and place	Using distinctive design to link a unique taste with a unique place	Goal driven	Using distinctive design to link a unique taste with a unique place		
		Establish a link between happy living animals to good quality	Approaching chefs for promotion	Using personal credibility to establish a link to exquisite taste		
			Employ animal welfare in a bottom-up manner to build a brand			Employ personal experiences to build strong local brands

Figure 1. The Farm-based Entrepreneur's Marketing Mix (FEMM)

## Conclusion and implications

In this study we identify practices that farm-based entrepreneurs can employ to create and expand the markets for their unique products; thus, we contribute to an enhanced understanding of farm-based entrepreneurship (Alsos *et al.*, 2003; Alsos *et al.*, 2011; Dias *et al.*, 2019; Vik and McElwee, 2011). Farm-based entrepreneurs who successfully employ our study's proposed FEMM framework can reduce uncertainty and risk, creating a favourable market environment for their products (Haden *et al.*, 2016).

This study represents a first attempt at contextualising EM in the context of farm-based entrepreneurship in the local food sector, highlighting the complexities and dynamics involved when farm-based entrepreneurs strive to creatively leverage themselves, their farm-based resources, and their networks to secure a unique position in their market channels. In this way, we contextualises and extend the previous EMM frameworks of Martin (2009) and of Zontanos and Anderson (2004), contributing a novel approach to the field of EM. We hope that our proposed framework can serve as inspiration for future studies within farm-farm based entrepreneurship, from a qualitative as well as quantitative perspective. Being a neglected area for entrepreneurial marketing studies, we also recommend future studies employing the co-creation perspective by Kasouf *et al.* (2008). Their framework can be used as lens to further explore the patterns in co-creation and how these influence the farm-based entrepreneurs' practices in a more long-term market perspective.

The research is based on a multiple case study design; therefore, further empirical case studies in other rural and entrepreneurial contexts are thus needed to verify our proposed model (Flyvbjerg, 2006). However, our aim was not to generalise but to provide novel insights into a relatively unexplored phenomenon like market creation in the farm-based entrepreneurship field. In line with Flyvbjerg (2006), and although we cannot formally generalise our findings to other sectors, we nevertheless provide theoretical insights and present the experiences of comparable farm-based and other small businesses that are creating a market for their unique products.



Our study can inspire farm-based businesses to utilise and transform their unique resources to achieve product success. In light of policy, we recommend that it might be beneficial to establish policy programmes aiding farm-based entrepreneurs to thrive in the market. Likewise, it might be beneficial to introduce accelerator programmes specifically focusing on the relevance of the farm-based resources and farm-based entrepreneurs' existing networks, and how to make more strategically use of these in market development. In such programmes, the FEMM framework can be used for educational purposes.

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