



STRATEGIC PLAN 2021-2025

VISION To be recognized as a leader in education and business support services within the cheese industry, most importantly within the Vermont cheesemaking community.

MISSION To advance the production and image of premier cheese from Vermont by supporting the health, growth and success of each of our members through four focus areas:

- Organizational health
- Professional cheese education
- Business support
- Industry sustainability-specific issues

SHARED PHILOSOPHY The Council believes that cheesemaking is a sustainable industry that is vibrant, growing, and cooperative. Supporting its members means supporting the Vermont community, its agricultural practices, and the sustainability of its working rural landscape. The organization welcomes all cheese producers, sellers, suppliers, industry professionals and friends of the Vermont cheese industry. The Council operates to expose the general public to the high quality and diversity of Vermont cheese and to educate its members to continually improve their cheeses and the businesses that produce and sell those cheeses.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Looking forward, Vermont Cheese Council (VCC) is in a strong position to maintain and potentially grow its position as a provider of education, business assistance, community engagement, and sustainability support for the Vermont cheesemaking community. As other cheese guilds and the artisan cheesemaking community grow across the U.S., it is imperative that the Vermont Cheese Council continue to expand its support for the cheesemaking community if it wants to maintain its leadership position within the broader industry and continue to position Vermont cheeses as central to the artisan cheese market within the U.S. This plan targets this purpose by focusing on two main things: (a) expanding our programming and organization to broaden our Principal Member (i.e. Vermont cheesemaking business) support and (b) stabilizing VCC financially as part of our growth strategy.

In order to identify strategic goals and potential areas for organization expansion or program growth, VCC assessed Principal Members' needs (using one-on-one conversation and surveys both), current industry/market conditions, Vermont cheese' position in the marketplace, and the current VCC position in the marketplace (see [Appendix A](#) for this information). The goals, strategies, and action items in this plan were developed in response to this information; alongside this effort, we used the strategic plan to also address these related questions: What is working well that we should continue? If we want to expand programming beyond our existing areas, where and how will we look for funding? How will we finance our organization in a way that is sustainable in the long term?

Relying on grants and donor funding can help fund initial growth in a new program area, but in the long term, our programs should ideally be self-funded when possible (i.e. labor, materials, supplies, and other costs should be paid for by direct program revenue). This is because grants can come and go and shift in availability from year to year, as can donor funding, resulting in funding that may be reliable only for a specific time-frame, but not indefinitely. That said – for new programs that we believe (a) will benefit VCC and our members in the long run and (b) can be self-sustaining financially at some point though not in their initial launch years, we should pursue grant, donor, and other “launch” funding. It is vital that VCC maintain its reputation and position as a leader in supporting cheesemakers not just to maintain the Vermont Cheese Brand, but also in order to maintain the credibility needed to pursue and implement this kind of “launch” funding in a way that enables the organization to bring in new staff/expand programs in a manner that is sustainable in the long term.

Keeping these issues in mind, VCC will focus on three overarching organizational goals over the next five years:

1. Build and maintain the capacity, capability, and credibility in our services to support the claim of being a go-to leader in education and business support services in the cheese industry, most importantly within the Vermont cheesemaking community
2. Provide support that meets the needs of Vermont cheesemakers and cheesemaking organizations of different sizes, of different types, and with different goals
3. Operate as a sustainable business, from a fiscal standpoint, targeting revenue stream diversification and as much direct revenue-funded programming as we can (ideally fully self-funded programs)

The document that follows contains the following content:

- 2026 Vision
- Goals in Specific Focus Areas: Organizational Health, Professional Cheese Education, Business Support for Cheesemakers, Industry Sustainability Issues, Operational Sustainability
- Strategies to Achieve Goals
- Multi-Year Action Items
- Finding Resources to Support New Initiatives
- Operational Structure

VISION

Put yourself ahead five years...

It's March of 2026, and as we launch our new strategic plan for 2026-2030, we can look back and see clear growth within our organization over the last five years. We can be proud because ...

- Vermont continues to represent and be known for premier cheeses of excellence! The council has expanded its staff by 2-3 people over the last few years, which has helped us broaden out the range and kind of support we offer for members, helping them not just as cheesemakers, but as business owners and managers. Our growth has been managed carefully, so that our revenue base is diversified, we have a full one-year cash reserve that we can lean into to cover all of our regular annual costs if need be, and we are a stable source of support for our Vermont cheesemakers. We are proud to provide a workplace that is fun to work in and that also supports each team member's individual career growth goals.
- We have an awesome set of online and in-person education and business support resources that our members find easy to work with and use. We partnered with a number of organizations to provide these resources, including the State of Vermont, ACS, and other food industry support organizations across and outside of the state.
- We developed a support program/toolkit specifically for new cheesemakers. It provides training so that they know how to produce great milk and great cheese both, and it also helps them navigate becoming a licensed VT cheesemaker and commercial producer. We worked hand-in-hand with the state to create these materials and make sure they align with current regulations. Knowing we have a number of cheesemakers facing retirement in the next few years, this kind of "bringing up" the newer cheesemakers has helped create a "new" set of faces to represent the Vermont Cheese Brand.
- We expanded our support for smaller and mid-sized makers who struggled with sales and business management. This included launching the 25 in 5 program, initiating a drive to increase grocery store purchases of Vermont's artisan cheese; we helped to create the conversations that launched this program, while also helping cheesemaking organizations purchase the equipment, develop processes, and find resources to help distribute their products to larger scale wholesale buyers – creating new pathways for our artisan products to reach consumers. 40% of our Principal Members are taking part in our scale-up sales/production support programs, and about 30% our 25 in 5 program efforts.

We surveyed our membership as we met at the annual meeting this year to assess our performance; when we asked how they felt about the council, members said they were inspired and impressed by what we've been able to do together over the last five years and excited about the next five!

GOALS IN SPECIFIC FOCUS AREAS

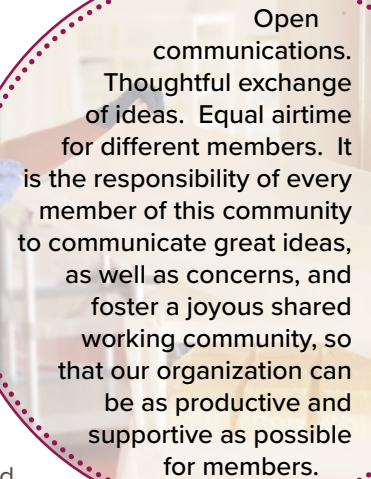
ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH

1. Ensure members find and feel that VCC's (a) community and (b) products, services, and support are useful and provide value to them
2. Maintain a community in which every Vermont cheesemaker and cheesemaking organization wants to be and enjoys being part

Is our community engaged and happy with the support we are providing? If we provide services that are theoretically useful, but our members as a community are not happy or engaged, we must ask: Are we doing our job as a council? For many of our members, one significant reason they are part of our organization is for the feeling of being part of something bigger than themselves, for the joy of connecting with other cheesemakers, and for its role in helping support the sustainability of cheesemaking, dairy, and agriculture in Vermont.

Path to 2025: When our cheesemakers and cheesemaking organizations, board, and committees gather, we need to encourage open communications, thoughtful exchange of ideas, and equal airtime for different members. It is the responsibility of not just the staff and board to maintain this, but the responsibility of members to (a) communicate both great ideas, as well as concerns, upward to both board members and staff and (b) foster a joyous shared working community, so that our organization can be as productive and supportive as possible for our members.

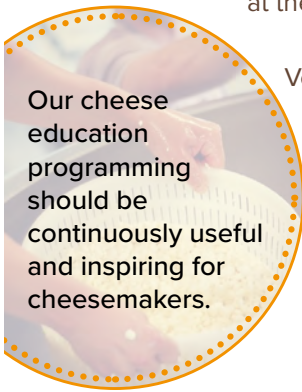
2021-2025 Target Outcome: Use combinations of surveys, meetings, and conversations between VCC staff, board, and members to be able to (a) report the value and impact of VCC for Principal Members and (b) guide pivots in programming as needed.



Open communications. Thoughtful exchange of ideas. Equal airtime for different members. It is the responsibility of every member of this community to communicate great ideas, as well as concerns, and foster a joyous shared working community, so that our organization can be as productive and supportive as possible for members.

PROFESSIONAL CHEESE EDUCATION

1. Provide educational programming & services that are recognized by Vermont cheesemakers and cheesemaking organizations for their usefulness and value (i.e. considered worth cheesemakers' time and investment)
2. Provide educational resources that enable and persuade Vermont cheesemakers and cheesemaking organizations to produce the highest quality cheese that they are able to (safety inherent in this)
3. Help every cheesemaker in Vermont know the individual impact that they have on the Vermont Cheese Brand's reputation as a whole: Both VCC and Vermont's cheese reputation is tied inherently to all our makers and their choice to make "great cheese"
4. Provide education and support resources that (a) are perceived as "helpful, useful, and worth their time" by the ancillary cheese industry associates that are necessary for the VT cheese industry to survive and thrive (milk suppliers, distributors, mongers/specialty food shops, buyers, etc.) and (b) can help provide revenue for VCC
5. Collaborate with educational institutions (e.g. Tufts, Cornell, etc.) to drive industry research, broadening our position in and engaging Vermont's cheesemakers in the research/educational leg of the cheese industry
6. Provide safety and professional training/access to training resources, making sure VCC protects itself from liability risk at the same time



Our cheese education programming should be continuously useful and inspiring for cheesemakers.

Vermont is currently facing a scenario in which newer cheesemaking organizations with limited education are entering the market while experienced cheesemakers are looking for more in-depth education; at the same time, Vermont has fewer in-state maker-neutral educational resources than there have been in the past. Because of this, there is an opportunity for VCC to expand the cheesemaking educational resources it can offer, with opportunities to do this in-house as well as through partnerships/collaboration with outside organizations. Our education programming should target self-sustainability in the longer term (i.e. it should be an operational area that can fund itself). Self funding could come from education for cheesemakers and also education for

mongers, buyers, suppliers, partner organizations, and consumers potentially (e.g. as part of the Vermont Cheesemakers Festival, special events, etc.).

Path to 2025: Use 2021 to explore and pilot different ways to provide programming, including both in person and online education programming alternatives. Develop a list of educational training needs and identify ways for VCC to develop and/or partner with others to provide this training (see [Multi-Year Action Item #1](#)). Specific ideas: New cheesemaker education & onboarding program, Artisan Cheesemakers Winter Conference, Maker Hangouts.

2021 Target Outcome #1: Work with the education committee, members, and board to develop a clear vision of where and how VCC would like to expand its educational programming and industry position/reputation in 2022-2025. (see [Multi-Year Action Item #1](#)).

2021 Target Outcome #2: Develop a new cheesemaker/cheesemaking business toolkit.

2022 Target Outcome: Launch a new funded research effort in collaboration with a higher-education research institution.

2022-2025 Target Outcome: Based on 2021 Target Outcome #1, develop a robust mix of educational opportunities and resources that has a consistent schedule from year to year and that is accessible for cheesemakers fiscally (and from a seasonal timing standpoint), easy to manage from an operational standpoint, profitable for VCC, and valuable/useful for Principal Members (per [Multi-Year Action Item #1](#)).

BUSINESS SUPPORT

1. Continue to support and promote the Vermont Cheese Brand
2. Provide business support resources & services that are recognized by Vermont cheesemakers and cheesemaking organizations for their usefulness and value (i.e. considered worth cheesemakers' time and investment)
3. Make it as easy and straightforward as possible to be a licensed cheesemaking organization in Vermont
4. Help Vermont cheesemaking organizations achieve their individual business success goals

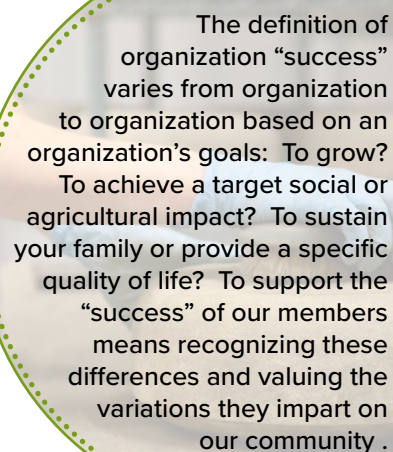
VCC has provided marketing support for the Vermont cheese brand and the cheesemaking organizations for many years – and while it should continue to do so, cheesemaking organizations have identified as additional areas where they need support. These include, but are not limited to, more sales support for cheesemaking organizations with no sales staff, operational/management or leadership training, succession/end of business planning and transitional support, financial and strategic planning assistance, etc. (see [Appendix A](#) for full needs assessment)

Path to 2025: Use 2021 to (a) identify specific needs of cheesemakers and see if there is correlation by group or type of cheesemaker and (b) work with members, committees, and the board to develop a clear vision of where and how VCC would like to expand its business support in 2022-2025. Specific ideas: Assessing how shared resources can be utilized for technology (IT) and website/marketing support; succession/exit planning; developing partnerships with organizations that already have business, strategic planning, and management/leadership training resources; new business launch support; cheese marketing ambassadors; sales matchmaking events; business scale-up support (see [Multi-Year Action Item #2](#)). Use 2021-2022 to begin pursuing funding for any expansion programs, which will be executed/implemented in 2022-2025.

2021 Target Outcome #1: Evaluate the current marketing programs for impact on Principal Members and assess if other investment options would result in a greater impact on cheesemaking organizations' sales (e.g. should we design the Vermont Cheesemakers Festival for more impact on Principal Member-buyer sales interactions).

2021 Target Outcome #2: Work with the committees, members, and board to develop a clear vision of where and how VCC would like to expand its business support programming in 2022-2025, and what level of funding will be required to support this expansion (includes [Multi-Year Action Item #2](#)).

2022-2025 Target Outcome: Expand VCC into 3 new program/support areas that are reported as valuable/useful for our Principal Members, per 2021 Target Outcome #2.



The definition of organization “success” varies from organization to organization based on an organization’s goals: To grow? To achieve a target social or agricultural impact? To sustain your family or provide a specific quality of life? To support the “success” of our members means recognizing these differences and valuing the variations they impart on our community .

INDUSTRY SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES

1. Help VT cheesemaking organizations address industry-sustainability-related issues

This area relates to assessing and responding to issues that could lead to loss of or harm to cheesemaking organizations and cheesemakers. The range of issues in this area include economic, reputation, regulatory, or other issues. It also includes, potentially, a need to engage with and support the cheese “ecosystem” more broadly as well.

Understanding the need to engage with the broader cheese ecosystem... By helping support the sustainability of our suppliers, our distribution chain, and other organizations that help provide funding and support to cheesemaking organizations, we support parts of the cheese ecosystem that are necessary to the success of Vermont’s \$650 Million cheese industry. This does not mean that VCC necessarily has to develop programs specifically to support these organizations, though we do want to support their sustainability and promote a good relationship and reputation with them. This can be done in many ways, including working with these businesses directly and also collaborating with other organizations that support them.

Path to 2025: These issues are not generally as cut and dry as the issues of education or marketing support. They include both longer term issues, such as the slow closure of dairy farms in Vermont, and unexpected issues, such as COVID-19. To most effectively understand how we might be able to collaboratively benefit from working together, VCC needs to maintain strong partnerships across the cheese ecosystem.

OPERATIONS

1. Member Communications: Make it easy for members to have access to VCC available programs, services, and other support as well as visibility into VCC operations
2. Operational: Streamline operational processes, so as to require fewer staff resources for management
3. Marketing: Develop informational resources and marketing campaigns/programs that attract attention to, build interest in, answer questions about, and remove hurdles to sales for VCC (for event participation, membership, etc.)
4. Membership: Develop clearly defined, maintain, & consistently communicate membership benefits for all membership types; Use associate memberships to help VCC market and broaden its programs per this plan, in a manner that aligns with supporting Principal Members’ needs
5. Finance: Plan for members to take full advantage of their membership benefits, ensuring we are bringing in enough revenue to cover these expenses; Develop and maintain finance systems that provide clear membership/board transparency to its financial system; Diversify revenue streams such that there is not one dominant revenue source (for example, one division could be: 1/4 from state grants, 1/2 from Vermont Cheesemakers Festival, 1/4 from educational/training/membership direct charges); Develop product/service/event offerings that help support sales goals while also meeting Principal Members’ needs/wants; Sales goals: Target sales of $\geq \$10\text{--}30\text{K}$ beyond annual costs to build up cash reserve over the next five years, with the goal of a cash reserve of one years’ operational costs; ideally, we should have at least 6 months pay for all staff (including new potential staff) in reserve before adding new staff, as well as/or strong confidence that future revenue will continue to employee staff for years ahead (unless we are offering year-to-year or shorter term contract positions); Programs and events should ideally be able to self-fund or be tied to a specific alternative funding source for program launch only (i.e. target programs that can provide and fund VCC efforts, rather than over-reliance on donations/grants)

In order to be a stable and sustainable organization, VCC must focus both on fiscal sustainability and the development of staff/technology/resources that support the organization in the long term. In annual planning cycles, we should use annual projections for spending/resource allocations that look out 1+ years to plan for both staffing and financial growth needs. This should be performed in parallel when evaluating new initiative growth opportunities as defined by the [Finding Resources to Support New Initiatives](#) diagram in this plan.

Path to 2025: Develop a staffing team that is vision-focused, motivated, and excited to accomplish their work. This team should grow in response to strategic program growth plans and funded efforts/initiatives. Integrate in technology designed to help VCC members gain access to membership and resources with ease.

2021 Target Outcome #1: Have our 2022 growth strategy integrated into our 2021 and 2022 action plans and budgets.

2021 Target Outcome #2: Clarify member benefits and streamline application processes in our member software systems, such that they will need minimal management in future years.

2021-2025 Target Outcome #1: Staff, resource, and program expansions result in stable, diversified revenue streams for VCC and a cash reserve that equals one year of operational costs at the end of 2025.

2021-2025 Target Outcome #2: VCC member website will connect members with easy to access and use resources.

STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE GOALS

The following strategies were developed in response to the goals identified in this document. These should be used to guide and select year-to-year and multi-year tactical efforts in order to ensure alignment with our strategic goals.

Goal categories:

- H ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH
- E PROFESSIONAL CHEESE EDUCATION
- B BUSINESS SUPPORT
- I INDUSTRY SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES
- O OPERATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY

1. Use committees to provide a way for VCC Principal Members – and other subject matter experts or volunteers as is appropriate – to help provide guidance for VCC operational decisions H E B I O
2. When VCC needs content or participation from members, try to ask for it as early and with clear definition of what is needed as possible H B I
3. Regularly communicate with membership about and create member visibility into VCC operations H O
4. Provide opportunities - through education, business, programmatic, and operational structures – for cheesemakers and cheesemaking organization communities to connect with one another H E B
5. Make programs and resources easily accessible for members E B
6. Use feedback mechanisms to ensure VCC programs/services are useful and provide value to both members and attendees H E B
7. Define, attract attention to, and build interest in the VT Cheese Brand B
8. Position the importance of every cheesemaker's impact on the VT Cheese Brand and reputation E B
9. Develop resources and research programs that help new and existing cheesemakers gain education and know-how to produce high quality cheeses (safety inherent in this) E I
10. Find ways to provide cheesemakers with feedback on cheese quality E B
11. Help makers address cheese quality issues E B
12. Help cheesemakers in VT understand the regulatory requirements for producing and selling cheese E B
13. Capture knowledge of experts leaving/retiring in the industry (e.g. Greg Lockwood, Dan Brooks, etc.) E
14. Create new cheesemakers/cheesemaking businesses tools that make it easy to develop cheesemaking and business best practices as quickly as possible E B
15. Develop an understanding of the liability related to educational programming and release language/contracts to associate with education programming, as needed E O
16. Use marketing resources, services, events, and programs to attract attention to, build interest in, answer questions about, and remove sales hurdles for VT cheesemaking organizations B
17. Expand business support services/resources to help cheesemaking organizations operate - this may include business, management, finance, and operational trainings; sales coaching; marketing services; and/or identifying any consistent needs that can be associated with maker organizations grouped by size, type, or other factors – and developing business support services to meet those needs B I
18. Use partnerships to (a) provide education, business, and marketing services/resources and that benefit members and are not currently offered by VCC and (b) develop relationships that can improve the council's ability to market the VT Cheese Brand B

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19. Use membership communication tools (including the member newsletter, forums, and direct communications when needed) to help members navigate industry sustainability related issues **I**
 20. Advocate on behalf of and facilitate conversations that include VT cheesemaking organizations in order to address industry sustainability related issues **I**
 21. Member Communications: Streamline member communication tools to make VCC communications manageable and simple to use **H** **O**
 22. Meetings: Find ways to enable meeting attendance for members who want to attend (e.g. consider online and virtual tools) **H** **O**
 23. Operational: Integrate process automation tools (like online registration, surveys, etc.) and document repeatable processes to streamline operational efficiency **O**
 24. Operational: Continue to use VCC staff to respond to everyday operational/general administrative tasks (email, meeting management, organization management/leadership, grant management, membership processing and management, etc.) **O**
 25. Operational: Continue to use VCC staff manage VCC funding & sales efforts and related reporting (for grants, sponsorship sales, and donors) **O**
 26. Marketing: Develop the tools and resources needed to attract attention to, build interest in, address questions and hurdles, and sell VCC products and services **O**
 27. Membership: Use associate memberships to support VCC operational and programmatic needs as long as this aligns with VCC's primary intention/focus of supporting VT cheesemakers and cheesemaking organizations **O**
 28. Membership: Have clear level definitions and list of benefits for every membership offering **O**
 29. Finance: Set up and maintain a "finance oversight" system that helps provide the VCC board and members oversight of VCC finances without operational restriction; this includes the creation of document finance systems/processes that help VCC operate in a manner that provides transparency to its financial state (including monthly and annual Treasurer's reports) **O**
 30. Finance: Use the [Finding Resources to Support New Initiatives](#) diagram in this plan to assess and develop robust financial support for new VCC programs/strategies **O**
 31. Finance: Ensure (a) that VCC monies in (revenue) can cover VCC monies out (spending) as an organization whole, and (b) that we know what programs/revenues are paying for what activities; This can help us know what is NOT being paid for and that we need to pursue independent funding to pursue whatever that is **O**
 32. Finance: Develop revenue streams that are diversified to fund VCC operational costs **O**

MULTI-YEAR ACTION ITEMS

While our year-to-year efforts may include smaller projects needed to achieve our goals, there are certain types of efforts that require multi-year, long term attention in order to thrive. This section of the plan focuses on these expansion areas.

1. DEVELOP A DEDICATED EDUCATION PROGRAM

This primarily focuses on educating cheesemakers - though it may also include programming that supports other members of the cheese ecosystem. This effort would involve:

- VCC staff, education committee, and board collaborating to create the framework for an education program that may include in person trainings, online programming, and the provision of self-service type resources for cheesemakers.
- Once the program is framed, it would involve hiring education program support staff that would work with the VCC Executive Director and education committee to help execute program management.
- It would also likely involve hiring and/or paying content creators, educators, and partners who can provide the training we are looking for.

Budget scope estimated for this program: \$50,000-100,000 per year.

Path to 2025: Use 2021-2022 (a) to develop a clear vision of what will be included in VCC's education program, (b) to assess what resources VCC would need to begin pursuing this work, and (c) to begin a startup funding outreach plan per the [Finding Resources to Support New Initiatives](#) workflow presented in this document. Once startup funding is in place, VCC would then find the right staff/resources to build, manage, and maintain the program, with the intention that the educational program as a whole be self-sustaining.

Related to strategies 1, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 13, 14, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28, 30, 31, 32

2. LAUNCH A SCALE-UP MARKETING, SALES, AND PRODUCTION SUPPORT PROGRAM

This would expand how we increase the visibility and availability of Vermont artisan cheese in the regional and national marketplace--especially the cheese of producers who wish to significantly increase their sales, but lack the sales, infrastructure, and financial resources to support this magnitude of growth. This is a complex issue with many facets. For example, for a smaller cheesemaking organization to accept a larger-scale commercial order for product, they must be able cut, wrap, and label to commercial standards that they may not meet currently; they must meet audit standards they may not currently use; they will likely need to scale production, and that production ramp-up comes with significant business investment risks that can be difficult for a small or mid-sized artisan cheesemaker to be able to bear alone. The challenges involved fall into three broad categories: (a) scale-up challenges (e.g. milk supply, production ramp-up, aging, processing, packaging, and logistical issues), (b) sales management challenges for those with no sales staff, and (c) changes needed in the distribution chain (e.g. distribution access into/beyond the Northeastern U.S., relationship management/facilitation with buyers, consumer-commitment promotional efforts, etc.). One example of a project that may integrate into this effort is the 25 in 5 Initiative, which targets increasing the representation of cheese in grocery stores the northeastern U.S. such that 25% of that product comes from the northeast/Vermont; again, though, this is an example of a project that has complex intertwined issues such as those mentioned above.

Because scaling up requires increases in resources that most small and mid-sized cheesemaking organizations cannot burden alone, VCC proposes that it facilitate with programs that help these organizations navigate this process. This may involve, but is not limited to, helping with direct and/or indirect marketing/sales support, facilitation of partnerships, contracting and/or legal support, and industry influence.

Path to 2025: Use 2021 to (a) assess the impact potential for this program, (b) define the range of opportunities/hurdles to the scale of growth desired by cheesemakers, (c) scope resource needs/costs necessary to address those opportunities and challenges, and (d) to begin a funding outreach effort per the [Finding Resources to Support New Initiatives](#) workflow presented in this document. Once funding is in place, VCC could begin to pursue the work associated with items b-d. It is important to recognize that with an effort as complex as this, multiple rounds of and different types of funding may be required.

Budget scope estimated for this program: \$60,000-200,000 per year for staff expansion, potential shared resource investments, and relationship building; possibly more for equipment costs, process improvements, and infrastructure expansions needed by cheesemakers, as well as contracting and distribution related support.

Related to strategies 1, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 15, 16, 17, 18, 22, 25, 27

3. EXPLORE THE IMPACT THAT ARTISAN CHEESEMAKING CAN HAVE ON DAIRY INDUSTRY SUSTAINABILITY

As the cornerstone of Vermont's agricultural economy and landscape, dairy plays a massive role on both the Vermont economy and the Vermont brand, as well as the Vermont Cheese Brand. To understand the impact that artisan cheesemaking can have on sustaining the dairy industry, more data must be gathered, reported on, and then potentially used to help guide dairy farming decisions. This is a complicated issue because for dairy farmers, the production and animal husbandry requirements necessary to produce the cheese-quality milk associated with premier artisan cheese is a confusing and poorly understood/accepted subject. At the same time, the availability of cheese-quality milk is essential to the success of [Multi-year Action Item #2](#) for any cheese producers who wish to grow and need milk sourcing. In this effort, VCC will commit time to assessing the impact that artisan cheese can have on dairy farming and the dairy industry, creating educational materials and resources for dairy farmers, and performing outreach in the dairy community.

Path to 2025: Use 2021-2022 to understand what data is already available and what still needs gathering in order to articulate the impact that artisan cheesemaking can have on the dairy industry, then gather additional outstanding data and perform an impact assessment/report. Once this assessment has been performed, if appropriate, VCC can begin partnering with other organizations to create educational materials and resources for dairy farmers and perform outreach into that community. As part of this effort, VCC should use 2021-2022 to assess what resources VCC would need to begin pursuing this work and begin a funding sourcing plan per the Finding Resources to Support New Initiatives workflow presented in this document.

Related to strategies 7, 12, 16, 20

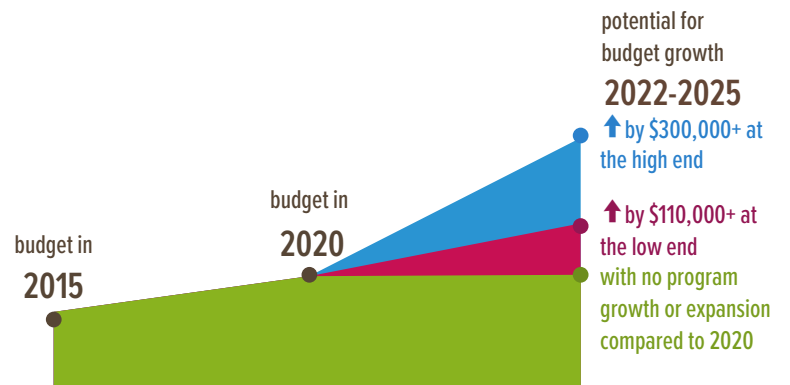
4. REVENUE DIVERSIFICATION

To expand our support programming to expand, VCC will need to expand its budget to support new resources (see the 2021-2025 Budget Expansion Diagram on this page); these resources may include but are not limited to additional staff, external partnerships, development/fundraising resources, etc. As of 2019, VCC's operational funding was almost entirely provided by the Vermont Cheesemakers Festival. This level of reliance on one revenue stream puts the organization at risk if the festival is canceled and no revenue comes in. It is imperative that VCC diversify and balance its revenue streams such that if one stream were to drop away, the organization's sustainability would not be threatened (see Funding Sources Diagram on this page)

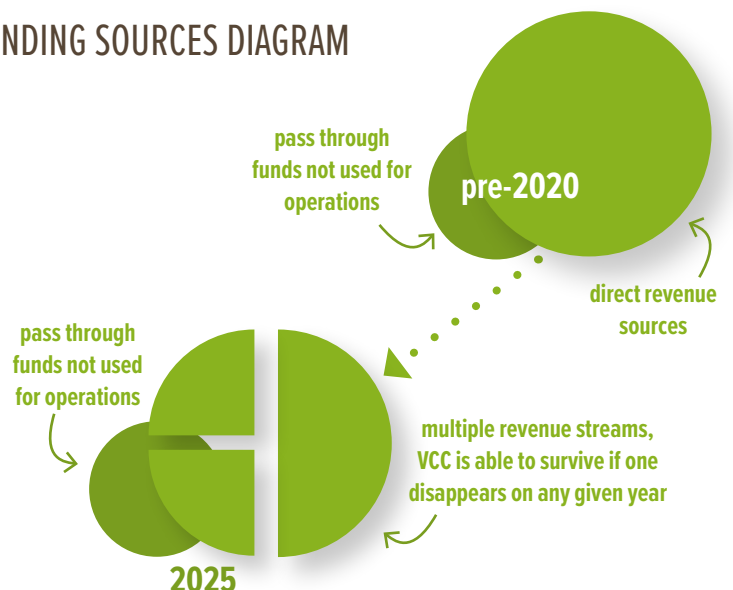
Path to 2025: As VCC expands to pursue the goals and multi-year action items identified by this plan, this must be done with an eye towards revenue streams, such that one doesn't dominate VCC's financial reliance.

Related to strategies 7, 12, 16, 20

2021-2025 BUDGET EXPANSION DIAGRAM



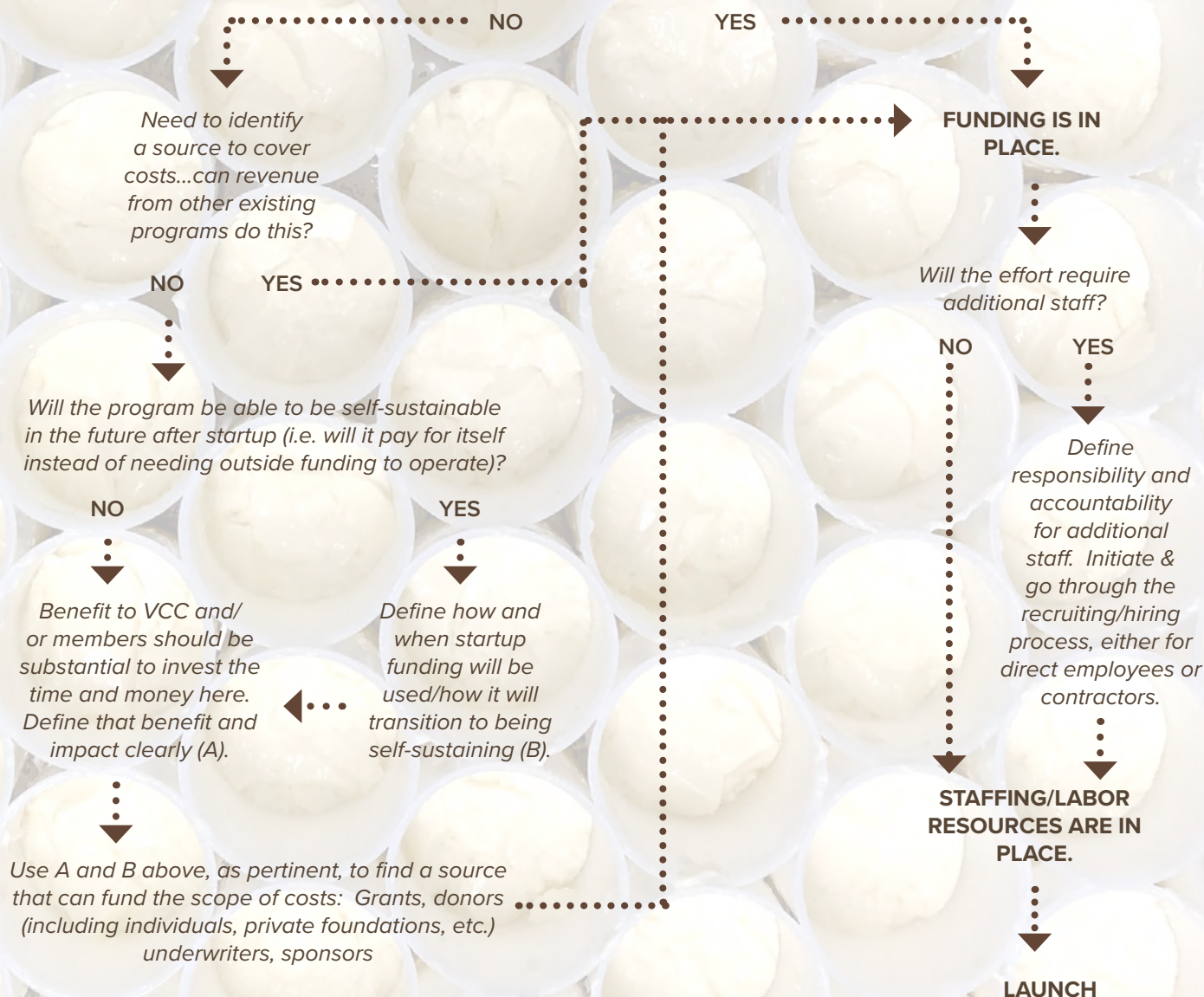
FUNDING SOURCES DIAGRAM



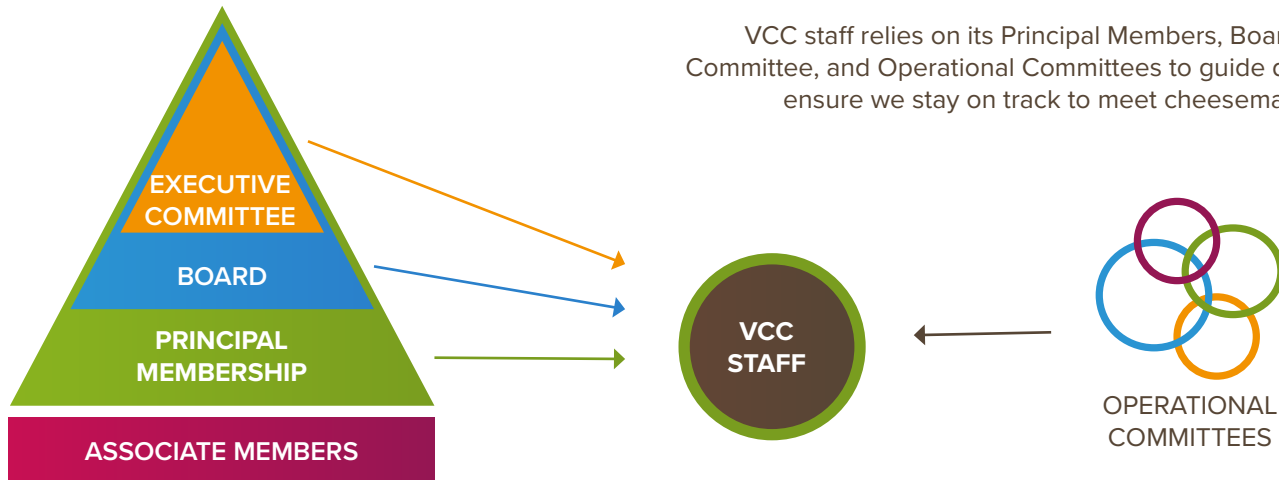
FINDING RESOURCES TO SUPPORT NEW INITIATIVES

If we intend to pursue growth and expansion initiatives, we must ask: What additional staff and resources are needed for this, how much will this cost, and how will we fund this? Grants and donor funding can help fund initial growth in a new program area, but in the long term, our programs should ideally be self-funded (i.e. labor, materials, supplies, and other costs should be paid for by direct program revenue). This is because grants can come and go and shift in availability from year to year, as can donor funding, resulting in funding that may be reliable only for a specific time-frame, but not indefinitely. That said – for programs that we believe (a) will benefit VCC and our members in the long run and (b) can be self-sustaining financially in the longer term, we should pursue grant, donor, and other “startup” funding for new programs. The following is a process for use with both smaller initiatives and more complex larger new program launches.

*Define the scope and magnitude (i.e. labor, costs, resources needed) for the new effort.
Ask: Is this initiative likely to be self-funding from the start (i.e. can it be launched without additional funding to support its launch and will its revenue be greater than its costs)?*



OPERATIONAL STRUCTURE: A GUIDED APPROACH



VCC staff relies on its Principal Members, Board, Executive Committee, and Operational Committees to guide direction and ensure we stay on track to meet cheesemakers' needs.

Principal Members, licensed cheesemakers from Vermont, are the voting members of our organization and control the organization's direction. Our **Board** and **Executive Committee** help **VCC staff** make directional decisions, as representatives of our Principal Membership. **Associate Members** are primarily sellers, suppliers, industry professionals and friends of the Vermont cheese industry; while not voting members, they are parts of our industry on which our cheesemakers are often interdependent on for success.

VCC staff is used to help achieve the strategic goals, vision, and work of the organization. It is intended to work in conjunction with the leadership of the **Principal Members, Board, Executive Committee**, and other **Operational Committees**.

Operational Committees are used to help guide and direct VCC staff in particular areas that need special attention and focus (e.g. marketing, education, finance, etc.).

The elements of the Vermont cheese industry include cheesemakers - as well as their dairy farmers and milk suppliers, electricians and builders, distributors, cheese shops, grocery chains, regulators, inspectors, marketing and sales partners, and of course consumers.

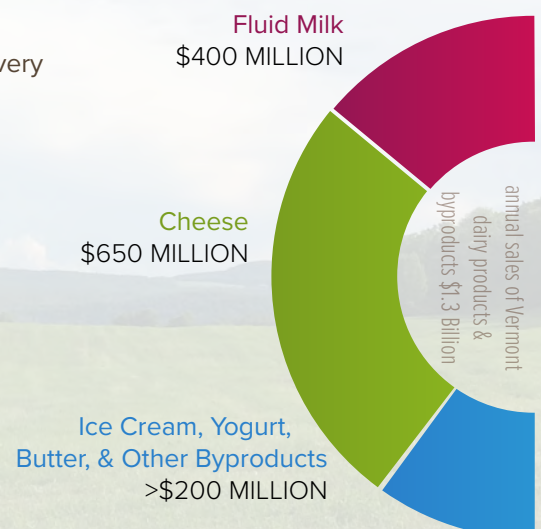
CHEESE IS AT THE HEART OF VERMONT

Ours is a big industry, made up of larger and smaller cheesemakers that span every region of Vermont.

Dairy represents **70%** of Vermont's Agricultural product sales.

Each year Vermont dairy delivers **\$2.2 Billion** in economic activity to the state in the form of product sales, industry wages & profit affects, & benefits to local agriculture, tourism, real estate, and more.

With **\$650 Million** in annual sales, **CHEESE** represents the largest portion of sales for Dairy Product & By-Product Sales in Vermont.





APPENDIX A

OUR AUDIENCE & THE VERMONT CHEESE MARKET NEEDS, WANTS, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

Last Updated October 19, 2020

Summary

This document is intended to capture member wants and needs, market opportunities, and various risks that exist for VCC at this time. Its content is based on member surveys and one-on-one conversations from the last two years, as well as conversations with others in the cheese industry as a whole. The information is not polished, but rather was put together as a working reference document for use by the board/committees when developing a 2021-2025 Strategic Plan to propose to our membership.

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VCC MEMBER & AUDIENCE NEEDS, WANTS, & CURRENT PERCEPTIONS

AUDIENCE SEGMENT BREAKDOWN

VCC's audience currently primarily includes VCC's members (as direct customers and the primary audience/group we support for VCC), funding providers (as a secondary audience and key partner in our work), cheese buyers, and consumers. Our audience can potentially also include all those in the cheese system space (milk providers, suppliers/service providers for makers, retailers, distributors, mongers, makers, consumer), since all of these individuals/businesses are cheesemakers' "partners" in being successful.

- **Makers:** Small, big, medium – all sizes
- **Distribution partners:** Aggregators, distributors, retailers, restaurants, chefs, marketing partners
- **Consumers**
- **Suppliers:** Of inputs (milk, cultures, etc.), equipment, maintenance & infrastructure suppliers (construction, electrician, humidity control, etc.), and other organizations that may be able to provide services that benefit VCC members (such as business training service providers)
- **VCC Funding Partners:** Grants, foundations, individuals, etc.

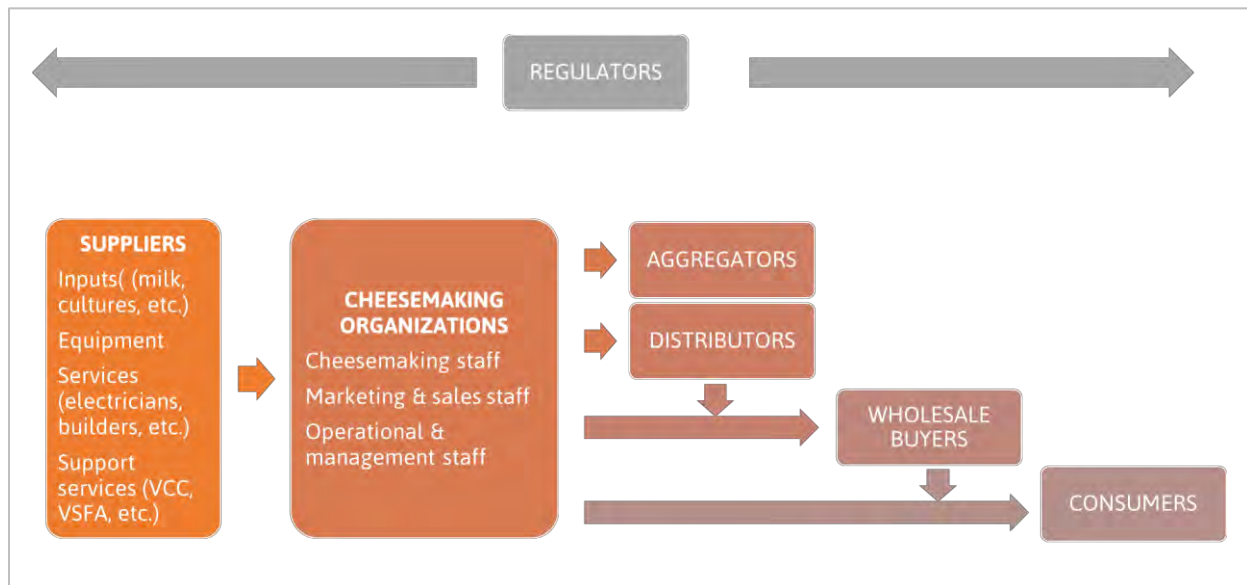


Figure 1. The Cheese System

AUDIENCE NEEDS

Maker-Members' Needs

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

FINANCE-RELATED

- help with business planning – ie if I make this many # of cheese, what else can I support
- clearer vision regarding where you want your company to go, where to scale up, strategy
- Desire to be able to market and sell better without having to scale marketing beyond the size/scale of the business
- ability and \$ to expand facility/infrastructure

BUSINESS PLANNING

- Support for restart after disaster (how to do this manageably)
- Maintaining high level of food safety and consistency of quality
- clearer vision regarding where you want your company to go, where to scale up, strategy
- work life balance as a maker/how do I make a living
- succession planning

SALES

- Increasing sales/marketing opportunities/reach for makers
- new distribution chains
- public education/exposure to good milk; dairy education
- Stronger messaging about positive impact of cheese business (on vt and community)
- Find a way to leverage and coordinate the quality of the Vermont makers/market of cheese

MARKETING

- Increasing sales/marketing opportunities/reach for makers
- new distribution chains
- educating consumer about cheese
- creating brand awareness and communicating that value
- public education/exposure to good milk; dairy education
- creating brand awareness and communicating that value
- Funding for indiv. Marketing programs for indiv biz like money for demos
- Stronger messaging about positive impact of cheese business (in VT and broader community)
- Desire to be able to market and sell better without having to scale marketing beyond the size/scale of the business
- Find a way to leverage and coordinate the quality of the Vermont makers/market of cheese

EMPLOYEE/STAFF RELATED

- I need to stabilize my labor and not have folks leave after a year
- Training (onboarding, quality, safety, cheese industry basics, the VT brand)
- Maintaining high level of food safety and consistency of quality
- getting the right workers, hard workers, less turnaround into facility
- Marketing for workforce development; recruiting

SUPPLIERS

- infrastructure support b/c of declining dairy (harder to find technicians repairment and dairy services)
- Access to quality milk

VCC & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

- To not have annual meeting during kidding season or on a Saturday, as this is a market day for some
- Support both VT cheese brand and also individual brands
- Funding from VCC to support demos/tastings for makers
- when looking for member support/help: strong leadership – want a clear assignment “this is what is needed/when”
- Committee was too hectic – I never knew when meetings were called; have specific regular meeting times – if I have that, I can do that...I don’t want “what time can you do it”; want to help-but I need a structure and consistent leadership and management

ADDITIONAL VCC BENEFITS THAT MAY NOT BE PERCEIVED AS 'NEEDS'

- VCC impact to support sustainability of Vermont working land
- sustaining dairy farming – for all the ways it touches consumers: tourism, life enjoyment, views, food supply that is local (both in VT and region as a whole)
- keeping dairy knowledge high in VT – so that know-how doesn't get lost over time by the slow closures of dairy farms that provide variety in practices and breedstock/stock health

WHAT MEMBERS WANT FROM VCC

(This section includes a number of thoughts/ideas captured from many conversations/surveys/annual meeting inputs/etc.)

Social connection/Industry inspiration/network development

- To get together and connect
- To inspire one another
- Celebrate the small successes, not just the big
- To have fun
- Tie in a tour of one of the member during the annual meeting.
- To feel more in touch with other makers
- Go and visit a farm before the board meeting.
- We're all very busy but can do more online: maybe use discussion board, post meeting minutes.
- Would be nice to have more of an online community, classified section used cheesemaking equipment, etc.
- Website is usually out of date for job postings. Maker comment: Hiring and finding good people is one of the toughest parts of our job.
- 156 milk processors; 78-82 cheesemakers in the state; we have ~55 as members; We have members who are members but not showing up –how do we make this council a vibrant place; why are folks not showing up? Why are people not joining? Do we want to bring in associate members – equipment folks...?
- Annual mtg input from Laura Ginsburg: At VAAFM we just had a conversation about VT having a number of small processors – fluid milk and yogurt makers who often use similar equipment---if there is a way to expand to support small other folks who don't have good training; we have seen a small makers with no support
- What is the scale and nature of the membership – how do we optimize that to serve our mission?
- Be sure we show appreciate/thanks to one another for what all local makers bring to the VT brand and community
- Access to meetings in a way that allows makers to connect with one another
- Access to meetings that don't also result in major timing conflict with kidding/lambing/calving season OR major markets (Can we shift this to around the annual festival – when folks are already together? Or have a spring/winter/fall event that is easier to access AND has some kind of meet/greet with mongers/training/other? Industry day AND annual meeting?)

Monger and distributor-related

These are “wants” listed by cheesemaking organizations, unless otherwise noted.

- Monger training
- More state visits

- ED thought: there's an opportunity to survey makers and ask them what they wish mongers would talk about/what most sells their cheese when they sell first hand
- Have VCC play matchmaker between retailers/dist. – want VCC to facilitate this
- Have direct event – maybe part of fest – where distributors and retailers can talk one on one with makers

Expand VT brand recognition

- Have VCC play matchmaker between makers and retailers/distributors and makers – want VCC to facilitate this
- Have direct event – maybe part of fest – where distributors and retailers can talk one on one with makers

More marketing support

- More state visits
- See what wholesale buyers are working with what distributors
 - Marty thought: There may be an opportunity to create some kind of deep dive for retailers/those on the buying end so that they can see some kind of info sheet that tells them – for every maker in VT - how they can get any makers' cheese and how makers most prefer it be bought for/to them
 - Add web page with maps and distributors and ability for audience/shops to see what distributors go where
 - Make it EASY for retailers to buy VT cheese
- External marketing
 - We're not on VPR – even their cheese shows!
 - Get on NPR!
 - Partner with VT tourism dept.
 - Marketing Opps that have been being used for 18 surveyed members (item on left; right shows % of respondents and # of respondents for whom this was used):

–	61.11%
GOOD FOOD MERCANTILES	11
–	50.00%
STATEWIDE EVENTS, LIKE LOCAL FOOD MARKETS, FOOD & WINE FESTIVALS, OPEN FARM WEEK	9
–	72.22%
VERMONT PANCAKE BREAKFAST AT ACS	13
–	88.89%
VERMONT CHEESEMAKERS FESTIVAL	16
–	0.00%
VCC AFFILIATED PROGRAMS LIKE DIG IN VT, ROOTED IN VT, VFN FORUM	0
–	66.67%
SOCIAL MEDIA, SUCH AS FACEBOOK, INSTAGRAM, TWITTER	12
–	33.33%
NATIONAL EVENTS SUCH AS CHEESE OF CHOICE RAW MILK CHEESE DAY, AMERICAN CHEESE MONTH	6
–	88.89%
VERMONT CHEESE TRAIL MAP	

- Of above respondents, only half surveyed could definitively say the above helped sales; the others were not sure
- Promote vt cheesemaking – instead of “vt is raw, farmstead, etc.” – instead define what vt cheesemaking represents; consider this for the brand...better possible positioning ...
- Follow up from festival -- people need to know where to get their cheeses; how to follow up with audience/attendees

- Network of info to provide makers with visibility and info on distributors and retailers in the region/US and to provide retailers with info on makers/available VT cheeses; can council create a platform/ways to communicate this?
- Expand/develop a strong digital marketing strategy
- Event marketing – VT. Cheese festival mentioned ... WI shows up at all over world as “US” cheese...shift that towards us
- Explore ecommerce opportunities
- Have vcc play matchmaker between retailers/dist. – want vcc to facilitate this
- Have direct event – maybe part of fest – where dist. And ret. Can talk one on one with makers
- Events – organize by counties – and have cheesemaker tour days; Okemo valley chamber wants to do that too; reinforces year long public involvement with cheese –
 - BRAND: the fabric of Vermont – “this is how we do this here”

Improving internal communication

- make sure all membership hears what is going on and knows when something is happening so know when cheese needs to be delivered/what is expected when
- also so know when marketing/program/training/etc. opps are asap so they can plan
- some folks feel they are getting just the right amount of info right now; others feel too many emails; folks are busy busy busy – ED note: keep communications tight and useful
- want to hear what is going on with other members – member stories
- ACS weekly is a good example of a good NL, with broader cheese news summaries
- Many people like how much communication they are receiving – weeklies – and many like the depth of content/aren’t looking for more
- Include meeting summaries or minutes for those not able to attend/those who want records

Education Programming Topics

- Lean manufacturing training for larger orgs, and smaller to think about too
- High quality milk
- business education
- Ideas on how to partner with each other
- Cheesemaking training – intro/master with depth
- Sales, marketing, finance, succession -- education/training/ideation/support
- Opportunity to create a working group for business practices; can this be partnered with other types of farmers/food businesses?
- More farm and maker visits
- Best manufacturing biz practices – onboarding, stretch/flex and repeat motion injury, etc.?
- Monger training, small retailer tour
- Certification program?

Finance-related

- give membership visibility to finance situation; consider an open books policy
- make sure budget spending reflects diverse group of businesses’ needs, not just some
- diversify strategies for getting monies – more corporate sponsorship, endowment, rev. generating events, programs/services, etc. ? Hire development specialists? Grants? Direct consumer funding? Event sponsors? Council underwriter?
- Get funding to a place where we can fund at least a part time person focused on development?

VCC Governance

- Input
 - Finance/marketing committees have each discussed the importance of recruiting and having others from finance/marketing/business backgrounds on the board (these are functions where VCC can benefit from outside know-how)
- Voting & decision making
 - maintain: one company one vote is good because it maintains equality of representation in playing field
 - make sure our cheesemaking organizations ALL feel supported ?? determine where balance of support goes: smaller makers? Bigger? Balance?
- Communications
 - Have communication that allows makers to PLAN for marketing and communicating early
- Operating
 - Be realistic about what kind of time makers can donate to actually get work done; committee structure did not work for past few years
 - Committee structure didn't work – needs more clear direction to guide and engage and follow committee; ED needs to coordinate/manage – need centralized leadership; are people actually doing the work if on a committee
 - Priority for VCC should include keeping members engaged – think about “how” (for guidance, input, committee/event help, etc.)
 - Committee structure is great concept – but might be asking too much of members;
 - Marty note but not comment: can we shift to bring wisdom, ideation, and energy of our members in to identify priorities for the VCC staff, which then provide execution in the long run – taking that burden off members/volunteers?
- Programming governance
 - figuring out how to balance the needs and wants of larger/smaller orgs
 - How do we keep/increase number of makers?
 - Laura Ginsbury 2020 annual meeting comment – at VAAFM we just had a conversation about vt having a number of small processors – fluid milk and yogurt makers often use similar eqt---if there is a way to expand to support small other folks who don't have good training; we have seen a small maker with no support;
 - What is the scale and nature of the membership – how do we optimize that to serve our mission?

WHAT VCC CAN OFFER OUR DISTRIBUTION CHAIN (DISTRIBUTORS, MONGERS, RETAILERS, CHEFS, RESTAURANTS, ETC), THOUGH THEY MAY NOT REALIZE IT/IF WE WANTED

- Training: Survey mongers/shop folks about what gaps exist – how to get cheese, how to talk about cheese, how to taste cheese...
- Opportunity to talk with mongers about cheese paper and what to tell folks when taking cheese home – so consumers can get the most from their cheese from a quality/lifetime standpoint
- Positioning Opportunity for Sellers: Being the bridge between the milk and cheese producers and consumers ... VT cheese brand ambassadors (with or without those words)
 - Local marketing “best practices/strengths/how to” training

WHO ARE OUR CONSUMERS?

- Who is the VT cheese consumer?? Everyone, from the more affluent localvore foodie through the grocery store cheese buyer. National consumers. Possibly Canadian consumers

AUDIENCE BUYING PATTERNS:

Anything we should consider/be aware of – consumer? Distributors? Etc.? Will help us plan our outreach/brand expansion efforts to better understand this...

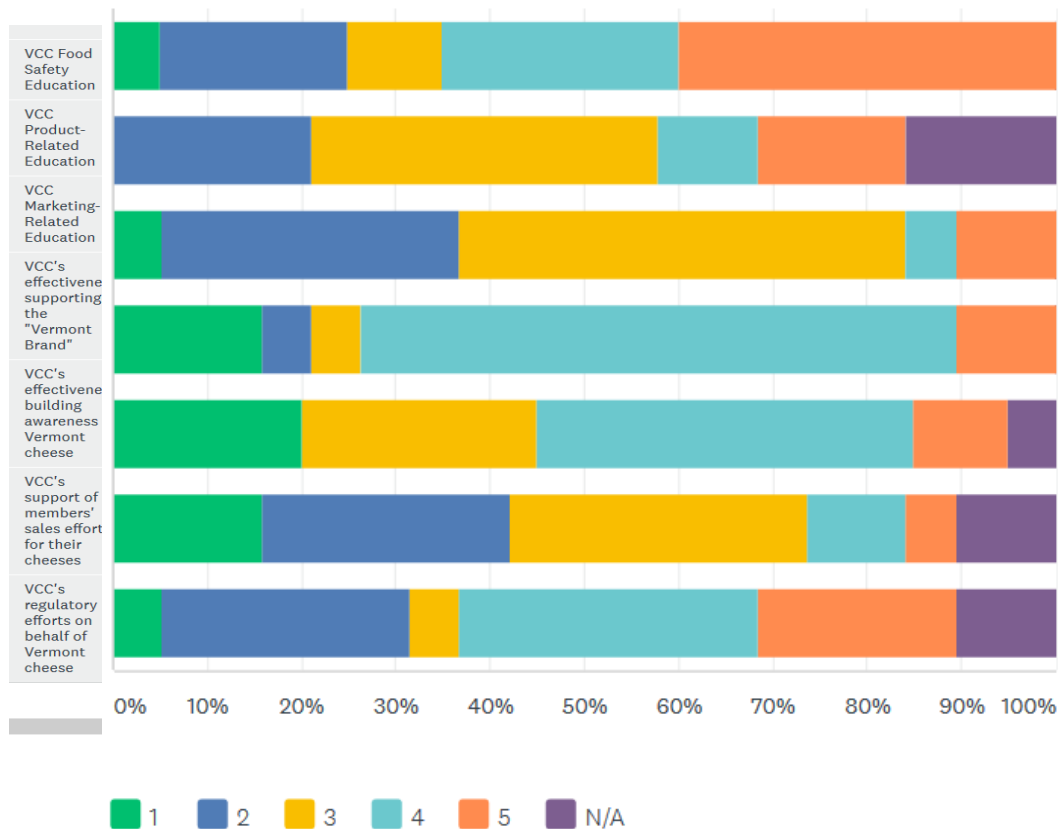
- Summer & fall seasonal buying
- End of year holidays – some buyers have short cycle for this and will place orders in fall; some place orders as early as summer

AUDIENCE OPINION OF COMPETITOR’S PRODUCTS:

- Vegan alternatives: Dairy farming harms the environment and is cruel
- Vegan alternatives: The only lactose free options
- Non-VT cheese – that WI cheese is THE American cheese; that CA cows are happy cows
- For training
 - need to ask makers of different sizes how they feel about what VCC offers/what they get from VCC or other sources
 - none/the self taught option: it’s free and works
 - other state guilds are beginning to build their own online/other training programs to sell to cheesemakers

MEMBERSHIP OPINION OF VCC SUPPORT PROGRAMS: DO MEMBERS FIND IT HELPFUL/USEFUL?

- **Survey takers’ opinions:** On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being the least helpful, surveyed members said...



VCC STRENGTHS

- Of 19 surveyed makers, 14 would be interested in participating on either board and/or committee
- Overall members are fairly happy with services
- Members are passionate! About cheesemaking and supporting a healthy dairy system in Vermont

ORGANIZATON ISSUES/CONCERNS/THREATS THAT MAY INHIBIT US FROM REACHING OUR VISION

- Smaller makers aren't getting a clear marketing benefit from VCC support
- friction between big and small orgs – we should not be fighting amongst ourselves; we need to get on board behind a common vision;
- failed committee structure; need a working structure
- lack of engagement;
- lack of clear vision/mission
- Collisions occuring between larger/smaller makers and makers who want different things – but want to tell each other how to scale up/what do to/how to run their business
 - comment from on small maker on succession and viability..."I don't think any of the small makers are "viable" ... I also don't want scale up such that by business devours my life..."

- Closure of dairy farms
- Feeling of “homogenization” of VT cheese ... losing the local and artisan feel from that aspect of things
- Maker comment: hard to increase making if don’t have a feel on how to expand consumer interest; ex: if market adds another maker to the farmers market – more makers, not more attendees

SOME MARKET, BUSINESS, & STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES

These are opportunities that exist – though not necessarily all things we can/should pursue.

BROADER NETWORK DEVELOPMENT

- Marty: There’s an opportunity to have a dairy farmer farm visit with farms that make at the quality most cheesemakers want/need; partner with dairy support organizations when possible as makes sense
- What would it look like if all the milk produced in VT were the quality needed for making high quality cheese milk 5 years from now? What is needed to make that happen?
 - Benefits: can help develop an amazing VT cheese and dairy brand; easier for makers to find appropriate milk; helps dairy farmers make money if they can sell to makers; easier for new makers coming into the state without a milk source/herd
 - Barriers: cost to dairy farmer/additional work they may not want to take on
- Engage with and build a network of regional and local mongers, distributors, and specialty food shops and provide them with training, ed, tasting, and maker visit experiences to get them “closer” to our VT makers – fostering the idea that they are also a group that speaks for/represents the VT brand as they sell our cheese/have their own customers experience the brand

VT BRAND

- What would it look like if all the milk produced in VT were the high quality needed for making high quality cheese milk 5 years from now? What is needed to make that happen?
 - Benefits: can help develop an amazing VT cheese and dairy brand; easier for makers to find appropriate milk; helps dairy farmers make money if they can sell to makers; easier for new makers coming into the state without a milk source/herd; may position us better to address “vegan” positioning concerns
 - Barriers: cost to dairy farmer/additional work they may not want to take on
- Continue to maintain the VT cheese and VCC brand – there are so many makers/guilds stepping forward to try to gain more market recognition, that this is something we need to keep an eye on (lest we otherwise become Rome!)

VCC FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

- Grants from state (often these don’t have the administrative/reporting/oversight requirements, which can take a good bit of time, that federal grant contracts require)
- Broaden event sponsors and council underwriters
- Broaden corporate sponsors
- Look at foundations that might be a fit for us

EXTERNAL OUTREACH/MARKETING/DISTRIBUTION ON BEHALF OF MAKERS

- Distributor and retailer outreach – see who is working with what distributors
 - ED note: opportunity to create some kind of deep dive for retailers/those on the buying end so that they can see some kind of info sheet that tells them – for every maker in VT - how they can get any makers' cheese and how makers most prefer it be bought for/to them
 - Add web page with maps and distributors and ability for audience/shops to see what distributors go where
 - Make it EASY for retailers to buy VT cheese!!
- Find a way to leverage and coordinate the quality of the Vermont makers/market of cheese
- Great cheeses of New England campaign from the New England Dairy Promotion Board

MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

- Make sure the board participants, committee teams, and all folks volunteering their time feel that their time investment actually results in results that help makers/the industry
- VCC needs to drive, build up, and help members keep the feeling of excitement about what they are doing with VCC and excited about the outcome of their time invested into helping the org (sense of purpose)
- Can we use brainstorming to be outcome rather than topic oriented
- Member/VCC volunteer comments:
 - A board member comment: Need the ability to align goals of my position and company with the work for the council; my bosses need to see that my time with council is good for everyone
 - Cheesemaker from a member organization: As nonowner of a cheesemaking organization – the work we do with the council needs to align with our bus owners' wants so we are able to get credit for that time (ex: if a grafton maker does council work – make sure that goes back to their boss)
 - If I could see what tasks are needed – if there was a list of big projects or smaller tasks – can I pick up extra tasks; concept of “if I want to pitch in” I want to know how/where to pitch in—need easy way to find a list for that
 - There's an opportunity to engage similarly sized businesses with similar issues; ability to connect more directly as workgroups connected by common issues
 -
- ED note: We need to make sure yes is the answer to these cheesemaking organizations questions: Does my employees participation in VCC help my biz do better? Am I having fun/enjoying myself when working with VCC?
- ED note: Can we utilize different member levels to help achieve our organizational goals and also to help VCC find more incoming revenue pathways in parallel?

EDUCATION

- Can we grow education programs outside VT? Are people open to that? is membership OK with that --- anyone have concerns/not want that? to do that as a money maker – would that price out affordability for in state makers? “As long as it prioritizes for membership accessibility – no problems”
- opportunity to engage similarly sized businesses with similar business management issues; ability to connect more directly as workgroups connected by common issues

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

- Opportunity for council members to define – as part of developing strategic plan – “this” is our community
- Opportunity for makers to think about how they can foster the development of new makers – training them to best practices, then using VCC/external resources to help fund and start new makers' businesses

- Engage with and build a network of regional and local mongers, distributors, and specialty food stops and provide them with training, ed, tasting, and maker visit experiences to get them “closer” to our VT makers – fostering the idea that they are also a group that speaks for/represents the VT brand as they sell our cheese/have their own customers experience the brand
- Think about opportunities to expand our membership community to include the broader cheese system peoples (see Figure 1)
- To partner with organizations around us who want the same thing and can bring opportunities and resources to the table to work together with us:
 - Local (and regional?) universities
 - State regulators
 - State inspectors