



## **Request for Proposal: Representation in Japan**

### **November 9, 2023**

#### **I. Purpose**

The U.S. Highbush Blueberry Council (USHBC), representing the U.S. highbush blueberry industry, requests proposals from marketing agencies to represent USHBC and manage its market development activities in Japan. The chosen agency will enter into a contract with USHBC from January 1 through December 31, 2024, which can be renewed annually if USHBC remains satisfied with the agency's performance.

**All proposals are due by December 15, 2023, at 5 p.m. Pacific Time.**

#### **II. Background Information**

The U.S. Highbush Blueberry Council (USHBC) is a federal research and promotion program located in Folsom, California. USHBC, established in 2000, is directed by a 21-member Council, which includes elected grower representatives from four U.S. regions (West, Midwest, East, South), eight elected state grower representatives (Florida, Georgia, California, North Carolina, New Jersey, Oregon, Washington, and Michigan) as well as 13 additional Council members (four importer representatives, four exporters representative, and one public member). Learn more about the USHBC at <https://ushbc.blueberry.org/about-ushbc/council-members/>.

The blueberries represented by USHBC are available for purchase for direct consumer consumption and industrial food applications. Blueberries are available in numerous forms, including fresh, frozen, dried, and further processed (i.e., juice concentrate, powder, and puree). In addition to fresh applications, blueberries can be used as an ingredient in baked goods, dairy products, beverages, and more.

Exports have become increasingly important to the U.S. blueberry industry. In 2022, exports accounted for 19% of the U.S. domestic production volume. USHBC aims to continue this export growth through the development of emerging markets. Currently, USHBC runs market development programs in China, Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asia. Activities across these markets vary; however, typical promotions include retail and food service campaigns, food manufacturing campaigns, trade show exhibitions, public relations, and educational seminars. In Japan, USHBC's recent market development strategy focuses on promotions with food manufacturers to develop new U.S. blueberry products. Looking ahead, USHBC plans to expand upon its market development efforts in the country through the Market Access Program (MAP) funding.

Japan is a leading Asian export market for fresh, frozen, and dried U.S. blueberries, especially for West Coast producers in California, Oregon, and Washington. However, in recent years, the total export volume of U.S. blueberries to the country has fallen from approximately 2,900 metric tons (M.T.) worth over \$10 million in 2017 to 1,957 MT valued at \$9.1 million in 2022. This decline can be attributed to several factors, including shifting consumer preferences, increasing competition from other blueberry suppliers, and economic conditions. While the volume of U.S. blueberry products to Japan has decreased in recent years, between 2021 and 2022, the export value of U.S. blueberries to Japan rose from \$8.0 million to \$9.1 million. This increase was a positive development for the U.S. blueberry industry and shows the value Japanese consumers see in U.S. blueberry products. With this in mind, Japan remains a key high-value export market for USHBC and its suppliers.

This RFP is designed to help USHBC find a partner to expand our promotional program in Japan. Applicants should suggest their strategic approach for USHBC, targeting both trade and consumers to increase awareness and sales of U.S. blueberries. Anticipated activities include, but are not limited to, trade relations, trade shows, public relations, and technical education.

### **III. Agency Responsibilities**

The selected agency will be responsible for the development and execution of an approved marketing program in Japan for the 2024 marketing year.

#### **1) Trade Representation/Promotion**

- The selected agency will handle all aspects of an approved trade marketing program in Japan from January 1 through December 31, 2024. This can include, but may not be limited to the following:
  - Serving as the first point of communication in the country with trade and media.
  - Fostering a network of trade contacts and identifying promising trade leads that can be issued to U.S. blueberry exporters.
  - Developing and implementing USHBC's strategic marketing strategy and activity plan for Japan, including:
    - Exhibiting at and participating in trade shows, industry summits, and technology summits.
    - Conducting retail, wholesale, and e-commerce promotions during peak supply periods.
    - Conducting technical and educational seminars for trade.
    - Partnering with leading health professionals and participating in health and nutrition events to highlight the health and nutrition value of U.S. blueberries to consumers.
- Promotional Activities: Food Service & Food Manufacturing Companies
  - Promoting U.S. blueberries to food manufacturing companies in Japan to develop new consumer-ready packaged foods with blueberries as the key ingredient.
  - Promoting U.S. blueberries to food service companies in Japan to develop new menus with blueberries as the key ingredient.

- o Experience or ability to partner with culinary experts/chefs for the purpose of food innovation and ideating on how to create consumer demand through new products using blueberries as a key ingredient.
- Managing all promotional and educational activities and subcontractors agreed to in the trade marketing plan and securing USHBC approval for any adjustments that prove necessary or beneficial for the U.S. blueberry industry.
- Developing USHBC’s consumer marketing plan for Japan for the 2024 program year, including:
  - o Collaborating with key opinion leaders, including leading chefs, influencers, health professionals, and more.
  - o Conducting creative promotions via online and in-person avenues.
  - o Developing and promoting U.S. blueberry recipes to Canadian consumers.
  - o Regularly updating USHBC’s social media accounts to attract followers and improve engagement.
- Managing the budget as allocated by USHBC, including providing corresponding receipts and backup documentation as required by USHBC and USDA’s export market development program requirements.
- Regularly communicating with USDA Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) staff to participate in collaborative opportunities and provide updates on USHBC’s activities.
- Coordinating market visits by USHBC staff and industry members, including meetings with key trade members.
- Submitting a monthly report that includes activity summaries, results, market conditions and new product developments, an upcoming activity calendar, and other topics of interest to the U.S. blueberry industry.
- Submitting reports for USHBC’s board meetings detailing program developments and impact, financials, and performance measure results.
- Other duties that advance the interests of the U.S. blueberry industry in Japan.

## **2) Consumer & Retail Shopper Marketing**

The selected agency will handle all aspects of the approved consumer marketing program in Japan from January 1 through December 31, 2024. This will include, but may not be limited to the following:

- Developing USHBC’s consumer marketing plan for Japan for the 2024 program year, including:
  - o Collaborating with key opinion leaders, including leading chefs, influencers, health professionals, and more.
  - o Conducting creative promotions via online and in-person avenues.
  - o Developing and promoting U.S. blueberry recipes to Japanese consumers.
- Managing all promotional and educational activities and subcontractors agreed to in the consumer marketing plan and securing USHBC approval for any adjustments that prove necessary or beneficial for the U.S. blueberry industry.
- Managing budget as allocated by USHBC, including providing corresponding receipts and backup documentation as required by USHBC and USDA’s export market development program requirements.

- Regularly updating USHBC’s social media accounts to attract followers and improve engagement.
- Submitting reports monthly that include activity summaries, results, market conditions, an upcoming activity calendar, and other topics of interest to the U.S. blueberry industry.
- Submitting reports for USHBC’s board meetings detailing program developments and impact, financials, and performance measure results.
- Other duties that advance the interests of the U.S. blueberry industry in Japan.
- Develop or garner consumer and/or shopper insights for the purpose of directing marketing plans.
- Robust media buying skillset online and offline, including paid social and paid search bid strategies.
- Experience in the use of AI technologies for SEO execution, as well as generative AI for digital creative assets production, is preferred.
- Experience in branding category-level commodities is the desired strategy and tactics.
- Knowledge of the nuances of the country by geography area including variances in food preferences and diet, insights on health and nutrition, media use and availability, cultural nuances, etc.

#### **IV. Marketing/Proposal Objectives**

With this request for proposal, USHBC is seeking to understand the proposed agency’s creative vision for the U.S. blueberry industry in Japan going forward. This includes determining how USHBC can continue to expand in the market, how key communication points about U.S. blueberries will be highlighted to consumers and trade, and how promotions of blueberry ingredients to processed food industries will proceed. Agencies should also identify what they view as the greatest challenges impeding sales of U.S. blueberries and blueberry products in Japan and outline how they would address those challenges through generic promotional activity. **Please provide specific strategies and tactics, along with a detailed proposed budget of \$140,000 USD, laying out retainer fees and activity expenses.**

#### **V. Evaluation of Proposal**

There is no required format for the proposal; however, proposals should be **limited to 15 pages** and should include the following at a minimum:

- History of your work with agricultural or other food organizations or companies.
- Company information, including prior experience with comparable projects and staff capabilities/backgrounds.
- A 2024 marketing plan that explains how the proposed strategy ties into your longer-term vision for what USHBC’s program in Japan would look like in subsequent years.
- Identify the greatest challenges impeding sales of blueberries in Japan, and provide an outline describing how you would address those challenges through generic trade and/or consumer promotional activities, including specific strategies and tactics.

- Proposed activity slate and budget (including program management fees). USHBC's preliminary budget for Japan in 2024 is \$140,000 USD, including the trade representation/promotion and consumer promotion scope of work.
- Knowledge of USDA's Market Access Program and other grant program regulations.
- Specifically, respondents will be evaluated on their historically demonstrated ability to think outside the box/creatively regarding strategy and tactics for execution in the consumer and trade marketing spaces. The response to this RFP should include case studies of executed assignments that did NOT deliver against stated goals with the original strategy and tactics. Then, what was done on subsequent attempts strategically and tactically that was different than the original attempt to accomplish the goal.

USHBC will independently review and evaluate each proposal, and a selection will be made based on the following criteria:

- Ability to meet or exceed all requirements.
- Adequacy and availability of professional-level staffing.
- Credentials and related experience.
- Project approach.

#### **VI. Authority**

The agency will work under the direct supervision and with the prior approval of USHBC for all program activities. All expenditures must fall within the program budget and be pre-approved by USHBC.

#### **VII. Non-Discrimination Clause**

USHBC does not discriminate based on race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, marital or familial status.

#### **VIII. Instructions for Submitting Proposals**

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All proposals are due **December 15, 2023, at 5 p.m. Pacific Time**. USHBC anticipates making a final decision on a contractor by December 30, 2023 but reserves the right to reach a decision and/or notify applicants of its selection at a later date.

Questions regarding this RFP or USHBC's activities in Japan should be directed to Renata Dalton by email.

Thank you for your interest in working with the U.S. blueberry industry.