

# RECRUITING VENDORS FOR A FARMERS' MARKET



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## WELCOME

A successful farmers' market requires a range of selection. Not only in product, but in producers. As few as five to ten producers who can offer a variety of items over the length of the local growing season are all that are required to start a farmers' market. But to maintain and grow a farmers' market, you'll need help.

We've created this brief guide to assist you in developing a successful farmers' market. While compact, this guide has plenty of useful information about planning, as well as working with farmers and community partners. You should know that far more information can be found on our website, [www.wallacecenter.org](http://www.wallacecenter.org) or [www.farmersmarketsusa.org](http://www.farmersmarketsusa.org).



## MARKETS ARE MATURING

In the ten years between 1996 and 2006, the number of farmers' markets in the U.S. grew by over 80%. In 2006 there were 4,385 markets, whereas in 1996 there were 2,410. Consumer demand for local, fresh foods still seems to be growing with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimating more than \$1 billion in annual farmers markets sales.

For some markets, it is getting harder to recruit farmers. Increasingly market managers are looking at new vendors from all backgrounds, including farm workers who transition to farm owners, immigrants or refugees, and beginning farmers to fill this need. Likewise, some markets are looking to where new customers might come from, such as including EBT machines to allow Food Stamp users greater access to the market. And, Market Managers and community organizations are developing new markets in lower income and transitioning urban communities to increase consumer access to healthy foods and help revitalize neighborhoods.

This guide will help to show how other market managers diversify their vendors and their customer bases to build successful markets for the future.

## KEYS TO A SUCCESSFUL FARMERS' MARKET

### 1.

#### MEET THE NEEDS OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

This guide draws on the experiences of many markets and market farmers, from across the U.S., and allows us to speak generally about farmers' markets, but only you can determine what is best for your farmers and your community.

### 2.

#### OFFER A VARIETY OF DIFFERENT PRODUCTS

Provide consumers with the most choice possible. Fruits and vegetables are good starters, but the more your market can simplify a customer's food shopping by including baked goods, dairy, meat, poultry, fish, the more a customer will spend at the market.

### 3.

#### ATTRACT A DIVERSITY OF CUSTOMERS

Ensure that products and prices can attract the broadest array of customers, regardless of socioeconomic status. A diverse customer base creates a variety of marketing opportunities for your vendors.

### 4.

#### HAVE MANY PRODUCERS

Create a fun, visually attractive spaces that draw customers in. A critical mass of vendors is needed to make a market look worth a customer's time.

## MARKET PLANNING

### A NEW MARKET STARTS WITH TWO QUESTIONS:

**WHO ARE YOUR CUSTOMERS?**

**WHAT MIGHT THEY BUY?**

On the day the market starts, most managers won't know the exact answer to these questions. Even then, customers will change over time and with the seasonality of products. It's a good idea to find partners or funding sources to help you identify this demand in advance.

It's a manager's job to position the market to reach the customers. Some markets survey customers with a "dot method", where the manager sets up a board listing a variety of products, and exiting customers place a dot next to what they purchased. (Learn how, check out the "Resource" section)

It's also the manager's job to avoid a glut of similar products. Many producers selling the same product makes a market less interesting to customers and creates unhealthy competition among vendors.

Look at your market the way a customer would see it—and there's more than one type of customer. For example, you can use the "Fill the refrigerator" or menu-planning approach. Think of what foods are in your refrigerator or cupboard. When your market has products to fill those spaces in your customer's kitchen, customers are more willing to buy them at one place, thus simplifying their shopping.

### ATTRACTING CUSTOMERS - VENDOR BALANCE AND DIVERSITY

A diverse group of farmers creates a more interesting, sustainable market, and helps to create opportunities for different types of producers. A market manager may not always start with the perfect mix of vendors. When you include vendors with different backgrounds, farming experiences, and varying acreages and production characteristics, you help to create the product diversity needed to attract and maintain a base of repeat customers.

Attracting a variety of vendors takes some effort. You need to reach out to sometimes unfamiliar community members, farmer associations, or local governments.

## **CASE STUDY #1**

### **PLANNING TO AVOID A PRODUCT GLUT**

Seattle Neighborhood Market Association, Washington

We chose vendors for this market based on the same criteria we do at all our markets: providing shoppers with the best selection and range of locally produced foods. Our goal is to not glut the markets with any one product.



We have many immigrant farmers from the same culture selling at all our markets. They grow flowers and Puget Sound row crops. Often, producers are growing identical flowers and crops. Some distinguish themselves by creating better bouquets, others with greater selection in row crops. The open market system and market shoppers tend to support those growers who have the best quality and selection.

Because farmers tend to duplicate product, we have to limit these producers just as we limit blueberry and peach farmers. We have wait lists at our markets for products that are over represented. We also are mindful of new growers entering our system and try to provide space at new markets with a combination of new and seasoned farmers.

Chris Curtis, Director

## ATTRACTING A VARIETY OF PRODUCERS.

Some farmers need more support or help to get started at a market and may need a specific invitation to do so.

These individuals may:

- Be new to farming
- Have lower-than-average farm sales or limited investment capital
- Have little experience in selling directly to customers
- Not be native speakers of the main language of market shoppers
- Be new to the U.S., with different cultural norms or market customs
- Be members of an ethnicity or culture that has experienced discrimination in the U.S.

The USDA calls some of these producers “socially disadvantaged”. This isn’t a value judgment, but a definition used to identify producers who may need additional assistance to get started and stay in business. Often the designation qualifies these farmers for federal assistance.





## CASE STUDY #2

### WORKING WITH FARMERS OF DIFFERENT SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS

Webb City Farmers' Market, Missouri



We have been working with our Hmong growers throughout the season, starting with a visit by Extension and soil testing and soil recommendations. Fortunately our grant from PPS, (Project for Public Space), provided a translator, which helps immensely when discussing technical details.

We are also fortunate in having an experienced grower who is willing to mentor our Hmong growers. To help the Hmong communicate with their customers, we supplied price cards with explanations of some of the unfamiliar produce. We also provide recipes and cooking demonstrations.

We do not normally have the translator at the market, just for farm visits and technical discussions. At the market, if there is a problem with communication our more fluent Hmong are happy to assist.



Our Hmong growers are very hard workers, eager to increase their productivity. Their efforts, combined with our modest ones, have already resulted in a much more profitable 2007 for them when compared to 2006.

Eileen Nichols, Market Master

## ADDING FARMERS TO AN EXISTING MARKET

Many potential vendors have experience farming but little experience selling directly to customers. They may not understand how or why your market operates the way it does. This may especially be the case with vendors who have a different experience of what “markets” are, such as producers with experience selling wholesale. In such sales, personal appearance and customer interaction may have been less important, and repeated contacts may have overcome any language barriers.

### CASE STUDY #3

#### RECRUITING VENDORS

New American Sustainable Agriculture Project, Maine



CEI's New Americans Sustainable Agriculture Project (NASAP), helps “new” refugee and immigrant farmers to build their technical and business skills, find land for growing, and find markets for selling their products.

Many Somali-Bantu immigrated to the US as refugees and resettled in Maine. Some have previous experience with farming or markets but climate, cultural practices,

literacy levels, language, and even market customs are different.

For Somali vendors in Maine's Lewiston market, there is a great deal of outreach to the refugee community and strong support for disadvantaged producers. Many of the customers are long-time Lewiston residents, as the market is one of few in Maine to accept food stamps and electronic benefit transfers. The local college provides a work-study program, and a student instructs market vendors in English as a second language. She also helps vendors—some of whom do not speak English—communicate with customers.

The result is that farmers “feel empowered with what they can do, about creating their own opportunity—not looking at what they don't have (access to high-value markets), but what they have created.”

Amy Carrington, Program Coordinator

## PRODUCERS WHO WANT TO JOIN AN EXISTING MARKET MAY...

- Present an opportunity to better meet the needs of the market's existing customer base, or to broaden the range of customers
- Not understand why existing vendors have priority, especially if the newcomers see their product as “better” in quality, price, et cetera
- Want to offer products identical to those being sold already because that is what they see selling
- May be willing to diversify or offer different products if given information about what is needed; offering products that add value, like jams or preserved foods – or simply items not offered by other vendors – can also help the farmer's bottom line
- Present an opportunity for the market to diversify, possibly opening at another site or on another day of the week

Farmers who feel excluded from an existing market may find an opportunity and a sense of empowerment by creating a new market. Setting up this new market at a different time and possibly a different location can help avoid the risk of direct competition with a nearby existing market. This can build the market's own unique customer base while providing “devoted” market customers with more options and perhaps different products.



## THE ROLE OF THE MARKET MANAGER

From a FARMER'S point of view, the market manager is the:

**MARKETING GURU** providing sales expertise

**CHIEF PROMOTER** for the market

**ENFORCER** of rules, fee collection, dispute resolution

**INFORMATION SOURCE** on municipal and health regulations



You may feel that some of these roles pull away from your time spent on marketing duties. Often, anything a farmer won't do falls to the market manager to coordinate or execute. With that in mind, here are some tips to make the best use of your time, while making or maintaining an effective farmers' market:

- Build a repeat customer and farmer base
- Think of the customers, and why they should continue to choose the market over other retail food choices
- Think of the farmers, and work to ensure it is worth their effort to come back each market day
- Work to ensure that market logistics run smoothly by interacting with the community as needed, and creating a process to involve the input of the vendors

## GETTING IT DONE

### INCORPORATING FARMERS INTO MARKET DECISION MAKING

- Market Managers need the buy-in of farmers; they are the stakeholders in the institution.
- Timing is important. Plan vendor meetings during slow seasons. That is often best time to seek the input of farmers in your market decisions.
- To avoid or resolve conflicts, it is important to have written policies and by-laws.
- A sense of ownership helps vendors to maintain continuity with a market if a manager leaves and another is recruited.

#### CASE STUDY #4

##### INCLUDING FARMERS IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Fayetteville Farmers' Market, Arkansas



Our market operates within guidelines established by a city ordinance, but rules, management, and promotion all come from a vendor-controlled organization. So decisions are first filtered through the question, "Will this be in the best interests of the farmers and artists who sell here?"

Of course vendors want customers and the community to be happy, but if some local merchants or customers want a change in hours or a special event that will adversely impact vendors, it doesn't usually happen. Vendors meet twice annually for discussion and a large potluck dinner. In the fall, they elect a Board of Directors to oversee the market for the coming year.

The Board does planning during the off-season, and hires and supervises a market manager. During the hectic market season, most of the direct interaction is between individual vendors and the manager, who assists vendors, enforces the rules, and promotes the market. The board supports the manager but also keeps her or him on task, especially when the manager is new.

Jim Lukens, Fayetteville Farmers Market Manager

## MANAGING FARMER EXPECTATIONS

- Your stakeholders won't stick around if their income expectations exceed the realistic sales expectations of the market. Markets typically go through a development cycle, with the first year being the most difficult and the second a bit better, as operations become more established, and the third year should see a good base of repeat customers for a successful market.
- Different farmers have different expectations for their daily market sales, sometimes arising from different direct-marketing experiences they had elsewhere.
- Different farmers have different production costs, which influence their prices. Farmers watch each other's prices, and they watch customer traffic to other vendors.

### CASE STUDY #5

#### WORKING WITH A PARTNER ORGANIZATION

Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association, Salinas, California



The Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) in California provides business training and technical assistance to beginning and aspiring farmers.

We created a Farmers' Market Short Course to demystify the world of the farmers' market for our new vendors. Once they are familiar with basic accounting exercises and load list paperwork, they can learn whether they are actually making a profit. Otherwise, it may seem as if things are going well, with cash in the pocket at the end of the day, when in fact money may have been lost, after the cost of production is factored in.

Field trips to our local farmers' markets give our "student" farmers a chance to examine vendor practices and to discuss with farmers the marketing practices that they like and practices they don't.

## **CASE STUDY #6**

### **BRINGING FARMERS' MARKETS TO AN AREA WITH A POOR REPUTATION FOR SAFETY**

Camden Community Farmers Market, New Jersey



The Farmers Market Network in Camden, New Jersey recruited its markets first farmer back in 1997 and she is still with us. As there is only one supermarket in Camden to serve 79,000 residents, our markets provide a much needed source of healthy food.

When the market moved in 2006, business increased so much that customers were discouraged by the long waits. We sought additional vendors without success, in part because of Camden's reputation as a violent city (though we've never had single incident at any of our markets). We approached a Hispanic wholesale produce vendor who supplies many area restaurants. He's been a great addition and we now see an average of 2,500 customers every Friday from June through November.

Why are vendors happy at our markets? They're making good money. We have a very aggressive promotions program, the EBT (Food Stamp) program at two markets and have partnered with the WIC Program. We have almost 100% redemption of USDA senior market vouchers. Our newest market is located at a hospital in a low-income neighborhood and benefits from sales to hospital employees and visitors and to residents.

There is no easy formula for a successful farmers' market in an underserved city, and we could not have done so without the support of organizations like the Project For Public Spaces and the Ford Foundation.

## MANAGING CONSUMER EXPECTATIONS

- Consumers are used to buying products year-round, and some supermarkets carry “local” products early because they were started in greenhouses.
- Season-extending growing techniques, and working with products grown throughout the year (or that can be stored) can help draw out customer trips to your market over a longer season.
- A baked goods vendor; a farmer with stored apples, onions, carrots, potatoes, etc.; or a seller of meat, dairy products, flowers or plants can help keep the market going when produce suffers due to climate or when a crop is not ready for harvest.



### CASE STUDY #7

#### BROADENING YOUR CUSTOMER BASE: ACCEPTING ELECTRONIC BENEFIT TRANSFERS AT A MARKET

Midtown Farmers' Market, Minneapolis, Minnesota

In 2006, the Midtown Farmers' Market became the first market in Minnesota to accept EBT cards, thanks to a grant from Project for Public Space, with funding provided by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. We created a sustainable system to accept both EBT cards and credit cards at the market.



## CASE STUDY #7 CONTINUED



The Midtown Farmers' Market is located in a very culturally and economically diverse area of South Minneapolis. EBT accessibility is another step towards becoming as welcoming and inclusive as we can be, and to truly serving as a gathering space and food source for our entire community.

In 2006 we purchased a wireless point-of-sale device that can process EBT cards, Visa and MasterCard. We then created custom made wooden Market Tokens in three denominations. Red tokens are clearly labeled "\$1 EBT/Food Stamps." These are purchased at the market tent with EBT cards, and can be used to purchase any eligible grocery items in the market.



Green market tokens come in \$1 and \$5 denominations and are purchased at the market tent with Visa or MasterCard. Shoppers pay a small fee to cover the cost of their transaction and to help cover the costs of running the program. Market staff take

on the bulk of the work: educating vendors about the system, managing EBT and credit card sales, and handling all accounting and reimbursements. The result is a system that is very easy for both the vendor and the shopper to use. In our first season (2006) we sold about \$500 in EBT tokens and \$7,000 in green tokens, and in the last few months of the year the credit card fees we collected completely covered the monthly costs of running the machine. We could not have implemented this system without startup funds, but the system is now sustainably funded with the fees we collect.

Joanna Stone, Midtown Farmers Market in Minneapolis

## CASE STUDY #8

### THE ROLE OF A STATE FARMERS' MARKET ASSOCIATION

Arkansas Farmers' Market Association



The members of the Arkansas Farmers' Market Association are separate, independently managed markets throughout the state. When the association was formed, its first goal was to provide market managers more educational opportunities. Joint action on a political agenda was seen as a later priority. But when farmers selling at one small local market were confronted with a change in the way state sales tax law was being administered – a change that could have caused several farmers to withdraw as vendors – a statewide mechanism was in place to quickly learn whether other markets were being affected, and ultimately to get the state Secretary of Agriculture to work on behalf of local markets throughout the state. Being organized before the problem emerged made a big difference.

Jim Lukens, Board Member and Fayetteville Market Manager



## RESOURCES

### **Funding to Support a Farmers' Market**

USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program can provide up to \$75,000 for a one-year project.

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/>

### **Managing a Farmers Market**

ATTRA - National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service

A free service that can direct you to resource guide online, or to order them by mail.

ATTRA, P.O. Box 3657, Fayetteville, AR 72702

800-346-9140 (English) 7 am to 7 pm Central Time

800-411-3222 (Español) 8 am to 5 pm Pacific Time

### ***Starting a Farmers' Market the Right Way (free)***

The Rodale Institute, 611 Siegfriedale Road, Kutztown, PA 19530-9320, USA 610-683-1400

[http://www.newfarm.org/features/2006/0206/frmmrkt/king\\_print.shtml](http://www.newfarm.org/features/2006/0206/frmmrkt/king_print.shtml)

### ***Establishing and Operating a Community Farmers' Market (free)***

University of Kentucky Extension (1997, 8 pages)

Need phone and/or mail address included

<http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/aec/aec77/aec77.pdf>

### ***Marketing the Market (free) (6 pages)***

Kansas Rural Center, PO Box 133, Whiting KS 66552, 758-873-3431

<http://www.kansasruralcenter.org/publications.html>

### ***The New Farmers' Market: Farm-Fresh Ideas for Producers, Managers, and Communities.***

By Vance Corum, Marcie Rosenzweig, and Eric Gibson.

(2001, 257 pages) \$24.95

## RESOURCES (Continued)

### **Marketing to Low-income Customers**

#### ***Accepting Food Stamps (EBT)***

[http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/ebt/ebt\\_farmers\\_markstatus.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/ebt/ebt_farmers_markstatus.htm)

#### ***WIC and Seniors Farmers Market Nutrition Programs***

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/>

#### ***“Hot Peppers and Parking Lot Peaches: Evaluating Farmers Markets in Low Income Communities” (1999, 61 pages) (free)***

Community Food Security Coalition,

PO Box 209, Venice CA 90294, 310-822-5410

<http://www.foodsecurity.org/HotPeppersPeaches.pdf>

### **Market Rules**

#### ***Farmers Markets Rules, Regulations, and Opportunities. (free)***

Neil Hamilton, Drake University.

[http://www.nationalaglawcenter.org/assets/articles/hamilton\\_farmersmarkets.pdf](http://www.nationalaglawcenter.org/assets/articles/hamilton_farmersmarkets.pdf)

#### ***Understanding Farmers’ Markets Rules (free)***

Farmers Legal Action Group.

360 N. Robert St., Suite 500, St. Paul, MN 55101-1589,

Phone: 651-223-5400

<http://www.flaginc.org/topics/pubs/arts/FarmersMarket.pdf>

## MORE MARKETING INFORMATION

### **Find a Farmers' Market or State Market Association Near You :**

USDA Market Services Branch 202-720-8317 or  
<http://apps.ams.usda.gov/FarmersMarkets/>

### **Businesses Planning and Production Information**

Find your County Extension Service office for information on business planning and production issues.

Cooperative Extension Headquarters 202-720-7441  
<http://www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension/index.html>

### ***Market Gardening: A Start-up Guide (free)***

Basic information on marketing, equipment, record-keeping, business planning, food safety, organic production, grower profiles, crop rotation, and common types of market produce.  
(2002, 16 pages)

ATTRA, National Center for Appropriate Technology, 800-346-9140  
<http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/marektgardening.html>

### **Estimating the Market's Economic Impact**

#### ***"Sticky" Economy Evaluation Device (free)***

A tool designed to measure a public markets' impact on the local economy.

[marketumbrella.org](http://marketumbrella.org), New Orleans, LA 504.861.5898  
[http://www.marketumbrella.org/seed/seed\\_home.php](http://www.marketumbrella.org/seed/seed_home.php)

#### ***"Tools for Rapid Market Assessments" (free)***

A toolkit for conducting customers surveys, estimating sales and customer counts using dot posters.

Larry Lev, Linda Brewer & Garry Stephenson  
Oregon State University Extension Service. 541-737-1417  
<http://smallfarms.oregonstate.edu/marketing-publications>

## **OUR PARTNERS**

Our partners inspire us. They are leaders, practitioners and innovators of markets big and small. They are market managers, farmers, trainers, and advocates for the farmers' market community as a whole. They were our eyes and ears, translating years of grassroots knowledge into simple lessons all direct marketing farmers should know. They were kind enough to share their advice, marketing tips, advertising solutions and EBT lessons with us in the hopes of inspiring a new generation. Our partners are a resource to the whole farmers' market community and can be a resource to you too.

Both the Wallace Center and the Northeast Midwest Institute would like to offer our thanks to August Schumacher Jr, whose national leadership on farmers' markets inspired our work and the work of countless others.





FARM TO TABLE

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FRESHFARM MARKETS

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