

SHORT GUIDE TO FARMERS MARKET

DEVELOPMENT

Part I. Organizing the Market

Farmers' markets can make a real difference in the lives of farmers, consumers and even entire communities. Once established, a farmers' market can become a much cherished institution. This is the vision most people have when they first explore starting a farmers' market. What is often not well-understood is that successful markets are the result of careful organization and management.

The organization of a farmers' market should not be taken lightly. Understand that when you organize a market people will become vested in its success for a number of different reasons. Farmers depend on the markets for their livelihood, and for this reason they should be involved in the organization of the market from the outset. The market's success depends on it. Merchants will come to depend on the market if it is to be used as part of a downtown or Main Street development strategy. Local consumers, particularly seniors and others whose mobility is limited by choice or necessity will come to depend on the market as a primary source for fresh food.

Farmers' markets can be a lot of fun but, as any successful market organizer will attest, they are serious business. As you work to meet the needs of farmers, consumers and the host community, you will also be expected to address things like health codes and liability insurance. Furthermore, once a market has been started, the structure and resources must be put into place to sustain it over the long-term. The market must, in short, be managed.

The intent here is not to intimidate, but rather to underscore the fact that successful markets don't just happen. Good organization and management bring the vision to life. Anyone interested in starting a market is strongly encouraged to seek guidance from those familiar with what it takes to get a market off to a strong start, and what is necessary to successfully manage a market so it thrives and grows year after year.

Part I. A Vision for your Market

Every hamlet, village or city is unique. It's important to consider who your customer base is when envisioning your farmers market. Will customers be interested in high-end specialty products? Will your market serve eligible WIC (Women, Infants and Children) or Senior customers for whom there are federally-supported farmers' market nutrition programs? Are there opportunities to meet the needs of customers with special ethnic or other cultural interests? Is there likely to be substantial interest in organic products? Does the customer base differ on weekdays or weekends? Is there a significant tourist season? Do people travel by car, foot or mass transit?

These types of questions should help you plan for the best day, time, location and product diversity of your market. Thinking through your customer base can also help you decide what special attractions to add to your market to make it unique.



For instance, a weekday market that is most-frequented by stay-at-home

parents, downtown business workers, schoolteachers and retirees, could offer activities that encourage people to stay and interact. By providing shaded seating and allowing a vendor to cater hot food and beverages, the market can provide an out-of-the ordinary weekday event for office workers and people in the community who will use the market as an opportunity to get out of the house with the kids or by themselves, to spend times with others. The best, long-lived farmers' markets are social spaces with local food at their hearts.

Part II. Developing your market

A. Balancing the See-Saw

As a general rule, the more vendors that you pull into the market, the more customers you'll draw in, but finding the right number and mix of vendors is a balancing act. For a market to be successful customers must find what they need and want, and the vendors must be able to make a significant profit. The job of the market manager is to find this balance in a fair and effective manner. Allowing a single vendor to dominate the whole market, or specific major sub-markets (i.e. vegetables, fruit, baked goods) within the market have been the doom or many farmers markets. Conversely, allowing anyone and everyone to participate, particularly during peak season when the amount of product is overwhelming and the prices are down, is unfair to the farmers who committed to building the market during the lean periods of the growing season. Finding this balance is an art, and having good regulations in place will make finding this balance a fair process. One key to the balancing act is promoting diversity from the very beginning. Recruit farmers that meet specific niches. To be sure, organic is a major niche, but so are heirloom varieties, ethnic specialties, dairy, meat, cut flowers, house plants, garden plants - the list goes on! And there are niches within niches. A market can benefit from having a number of different nurseries if, for example, one nursery specializes in native plants, another in house plants, and yet another in ornamental bedding plants. Fresh meats meet some needs and prepared meats, such as sausage or jerky, serve others. The grower of hard-to-find heirloom vegetables will likely cater to a different need than the grower of large quantities of staple veggies. The details do matter, and a good market manager will capitalize on the uniqueness of the offerings to draw new customers into the market. Conduct rigorous outreach and promotion to let prospective customers know the market

is offering new products and ensure you're bringing in a larger clientele to support the new expanded marketplace.

B. Attracting new vendors

When you contact a potential vendor, offer them statistics on foot-traffic, current vendor make-up, average revenue generated, etc, so that they can make an informed decision about whether the market is a good match for them (of course, this means you need to collect such information). Include newspaper clippings, an events schedule or a website address. Also include a Rules and Regulation booklet and an application. Fair and clear rules can also attract new vendors. While some may view rules as being too restrictive, others will understand and strongly support a market with an even playing field for all vendors. Predictability is one of the best benefits your market can provide to a farmer. If they know the rules of the market, and that those rules will be applied equally without discrimination, they can concentrate on the quality and marketing of their goods.

Methods: Visit neighboring farmers markets and market managers; attend ag-related conferences; network with farmers; ads, press releases, phone calls; posters; agriculture websites (Ag and Markets, Farmers Market Federation, Food routes); Cornell Cooperative Extension; network with community groups. Once it is up and running, a well-run market will advertise itself and good vendors will come to you.

C. Rules and Regulations

As your market grows, it will inevitably experience growing pains. Competition will intensify and disputes over space, product, predatory pricing, etc., will soon have you renaming yourself "Market Mediator." **RULES AND REGULATIONS SHOULD BE IN PLACE AT THE OUTSET OF A MARKET.** If rules and regulations are not in place at an existing market, it is best to have them in place well in advance of the beginning of the new season. A rules and regulations booklet is essential to managing a fair and professional market. Be sure to outline the types of products and vendors that are allowable: Is your market producer-only, or do you allow farmers to broker in products from other farms or wholesalers? If the latter is the case, be sure to have and enforce specific rules governing the brokering practice. Do you allow crafts? Are businesses, non-profits and restaurants able to join as vendors? Do you allow partial season, guest or bi-monthly vendors? Also, outline insurance and board of health, sign and weights and measures requirements, fees and a procedure for resolution of complaints. Last, but certainly not least, **ENFORCE THE RULES AND REGULATIONS** and do so without bias.

D. Providing Amenities

As you continue to strive to expand both your market and customer base, some market infrastructure may be necessary. Public bathrooms, a storage space for signs, tables, trash cans and tents, a supply of fresh water for perking wilted vegetables (and customers

and vendors!), and a refrigerator or cooler to store ice or ingredients for chef demonstrations and festivals may all be instrumental in bringing your market a notch higher toward sophistication. Though many farmers' markets rise and fall within a span of 8 hours, they should not convey a sense of casual transience to the public. Offering permanent amenities to your customers and vendors will help to attract them both and give your market a more permanent and professional look. Pay attention to detail to make the market a quality experience.

Part III. Marketing and Promotion

A. Developing a logo

A logo is a useful tool for giving a market an identity for farmers and customers alike. A good logo helps everyone relate to and identify with the market. Since Orange County markets generally operate only one day a week for 5 months a year, a symbol representing the market repeated on posters, signs, banners, T-shirts, bumper stickers, literature, etc. gives the market a presence in customers minds through the rest of the week and year. Whatever logo you choose for your market, be sure to place it on everything from the ad in the newspaper to the parking sign. Generally speaking a good logo is simple, but one which conveys the feel of your specific market. Make sure it can be easily reproduced in color and black and white.



Alia and Emily, daughters of Pine Bush market's sweets and cheese vendors, pose before the homemade ice-cream maker at the Manager's Tent. Note the logo on Alia's T-shirt and again on the welcome banner hanging across the back of the tent.

B. Advertising

1. Signs and Banners. Large colorful signs and banners placed at strategic locations around town directing traffic toward your farmers market can be the most important form of advertising. If professionally designed signs aren't in the budget, plywood A-frames decorated by volunteers or a community group can look almost as good. Get the go-ahead from the appropriate authorities before erecting your signs. And as a general rule (and as an act of simple courtesy) if you're going to put a sign in front of a store or other commercial enterprise, get permission first.

2. Ads. Newspaper, magazine and radio ads all reach different audiences and are essential to letting the public know the dates and times of the market as well as what's happening. If money is tight, save advertising for a special event like a festival when you can make more of an impression.
3. Press Releases, Articles and Calendar Entries. An ambitious market manager can get away with a lot of free advertising. Reporters are usually interested in a story idea if you can pitch it to them creatively. Also, many papers have a Community Events section that prints free listings. It never hurts to send press releases about market events, (call to make sure editors know to expect it) or post them on community or municipal websites.
4. Internet. Post your farmers markets' information on local, state and national agriculture/tourism related websites. A few:
www.ocfarmersmarkets.com, www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/,
www.agmkt.state.ny.us, www.foodroutes.org.

C. Festivals and Special Events

Residents and newcomers alike actively seek activities that represent genuine local and regional culture. True producer-based farmers' markets are about as genuine as you can get! A festival offers exciting new reasons for first-time customers to swing by the market and helps keep regular customers entertained. Look at your population in festival planning and consider what products your vendors offer. A festival could celebrate the arrival of a particular crop such as a "Strawberry Festival" or a time of year such as a "Heart-of-Summer Bounty Festival" or "Autumn Jamboree." Adding some children's activities, value-added food vendors, musicians, dancers and artists can all add to the celebratory mood. Special events such as contests and chef demonstrations serve similar purposes.



Homemade shortcake topped with peaches donated from a fruit grower were sold at the Village Square Peaches and Cream Festival. Baldwin Vineyard poached peaches in strawberry wine to give some extra promotion to the vineyard (for customers ages 21 and over, of course!). A lot of peaches and strawberry wine were sold that day.



“Piping hot husk-roasted sweet-corn” were given away free at the Village Square Sweet Corn Festival. Lupinski farms, who had overstocked corn that day, were pleasantly surprised to sell out. Here, some customers enjoy free corn on a patio table a resident donated to the market.

D. Create a welcoming space

The farmer’s marketplace should be a crossroads for people of all backgrounds and ages to come together as a community and share in the bounty of their region. Placing welcoming signs, establishing a children’s corner or play area, providing chairs for people to sit under some shade, offering cold and hot beverages, and encouraging vendors to create attractive displays will all help your customers to feel comfortable and welcome in the marketplace. If your market participates in the W.I.C. or Senior farmers market nutrition programs make warm and inviting signs that announce the opportunity. And even though your market is apt to be outside, keep the entire market space clean.

IV. Downtown Economic Development and Community Outreach

Cross-promoting with businesses

Farmers markets draw large crowds into downtowns. Cross-promotion between merchants and the farmers market can potentially contribute to the revitalization of downtown shopping districts by getting people out of their cars and onto their feet. In addition to serving downtown residents, markets can also attract others who would otherwise not have the desire or occasion to go downtown. Organize a meeting for downtown businesses to cross-promote with the farmers market. Invite merchants to drop off sales flyers at the Manager’s Tent in exchange for passing out Market Events Calendars, or have a “Merchants Day” in which you invite downtown businesses to set up displays promoting their business. Be sure to support local merchants when purchasing farmers market supplies. Collaboration is essential to building and maintaining community support for the market.

Community Outreach

Reach out to others with civic interests including artists, musicians, community and civic groups, churches, day care centers, schools, fire and ambulance squads and children's clubs and encourage them to get involved in the market. Some civic organizations will want to use the market for fundraisers. This can work out well provided you have clear rules and standards in place and the products sold are not in direct competition with goods sold by regular market vendors. As with the vendors, fairness is the rule when dealing with any market participant. Giving space to community groups creates great relationships and draws in friends and family that might otherwise not have attended the market.

V. Planning for the future

Funding

A farmers market needs to generate revenue to pay for necessary items such as advertising, supplies, a manager's wages and insurance. Some of these funds can be obtained through weekly stall fees through the season, but a market just getting underway will probably need municipal or grant support. Be sure to let your village or town government know the many ways in which the farmers market is an asset: creating a community gathering space, preserving rural life, saving open space, building community, revitalizing the downtown, providing a forum for arts, music and culture – the list goes on. Some web resources for grant money: www.agmkt.state.ny.us (Click on funding opportunities) or www.nemw.org/farmersmarkets/



B. Rapid Market Assessment (RMA). Conducting a survey of your customers once or twice a season to find out basic statistics such as where they live, how much they spend at the market, how they heard about the market, etc. can help a lot in planning for the future. Statistics also help in grant writing and recruiting new vendors. Opposite photo shows an RMA conducted at the Syracuse Farmers Market in 2003

C. Staying Accessible

Be sure to distribute a Manager's name and contact number in as many different places as possible. The key to managing a successful market is staying open to new ideas and the many perspectives that vendors, customers and the community can offer.

VI. For more information.

There are a number of outstanding sources of information about farmers' markets. Cornell Cooperative Extension is a great start! Contact Cornell Cooperative Extension in Orange County at (845) 344-1234.

The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service is a source of information and additional contacts. Visit their website at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/>.

The USDA Food and Nutrition Service operates the Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs. For more information visit their website at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/FMNP/>.

Guide compiled by Violet Stone, Consultant to the Orange County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board and Chris Campany, Orange County Deputy Commissioner of Planning.