

Best Practices for Successful Urban Farmers' Markets

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Windham Regional Community Council, Inc.



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Governing Organization and management

Farmers' markets are managed in a variety of ways. Some are run by the municipality, a local non-profit organization, or committee. There are some that have a paid market master, and others that rely solely on volunteers. There is no right or wrong way to oversee the governing of a farmers' market. What is important is that vendors, staff, committee members and volunteers have all bought into the organizational structure and the decision-making processes. Decisions need to be made in a transparent manner that is in the best interest of the market. Think through various methods of decision making be it voting by majority, by a select committee, or otherwise and make sure everyone knows how decisions are made for vendors and customers.

Regulations

Insurance: Make sure that the market and the vendors have adequate insurance coverage. The market itself should carry liability insurance in the case of onsite accidents. Additionally, the vendors should carry product liability insurance for their businesses. Different markets require different minimums for vendor liability insurance coverage, but they all are either \$300,000 or more.

Health District Permitting: Work closely with your local health district to ensure compliance with state food safety laws. This is particularly critical if you plan to offer samples and/or conduct cooking demonstrations. Additionally, some districts require each farmers' market to complete a permit application each year just to operate. It is best to contact the district well in advance of the start of the market to give you time to understand the rules. Be aware of how any of your vendors plan to sample, demo or serve any food products so that you can discuss those scenarios with your local health department. If sampling is not allowed, think creatively about nearby spaces and/or businesses that are allowed to sample so that there is an opportunity for potential customers to "taste the market".

Connecticut Department of Agriculture Certified Farmers' Market: In Connecticut, certifying the farmers' market with the state Department of Agriculture (DOA) is a good idea for a number of reasons: it enables your vendors to accept WIC and Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) checks, the DOA will list your market as a certified market on their website and publications, and it allows for the sales of some farm-made items exempt from certain inspection programs. Contact the CT DOA to apply for certification.

USDA Food and Nutrition Service: Becoming authorized to accept federal food benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is an important step in ensuring that your market is accessible to low-income community members. Census data and your state's

Department of Social Services or the like may be able to help you understand how many SNAP recipients are in your market area. Most markets use a wooden token system where the customer swipes his/her EBT card at the centrally located market table and spends the wooden tokens as they would cash. Individual vendors are periodically reimbursed for their sales by the market.

Location

Determining the location of the farmers' market can be difficult. There are many factors that market leaders should consider. Accessibility and visibility are two very important considerations. Make sure that your market is accessible for customers using public transportation or are walking from the city center, and that there is ample parking close by for those who drive. A lack of parking or nearby transportation will deter potential customers. Think about how your location will accommodate community members of different income levels.

Visibility is important to attract new customers and as a reminder to community members that the market is taking place. Finding a space that is accessible, visible and offers room to grow is critical to a successful farmers' market. Other factors to consider include relationship with landowner and access to utilities (electricity/water/restrooms) as well as ease for vendors to pull in, unload, and park off-site if necessary. Asking questions about your location's ability to allow the market to operate in inclement weather and thinking through how it will appear in multiple seasons are also critical pieces to your location.

Vendor Ratio

It's important to offer a diverse mix of products that includes affordable options. Fruits and vegetables should comprise the majority of the vendor ratio. Bread, milk, cheese, and meats are also good offerings at the market. Some specialty products are nice to have at the market as they give our customers more choices for locally produced items, and in turn support a local craftsman. Many customers use FMNP checks, so it is important to offer a variety of foods that can be purchased with those benefits.

Promotion

There are many different ways to promote your farmers' market, and you should do all of them! First and foremost, good, visible signage is imperative. Many folks learn about their local farmers' market just by seeing it. There should be large signs, banners, and even balloons up the day of the market to alert community members that the market is in progress. There should also be some permanent signs up that list the day, time and location of the market. These should remain up for the duration of the season if possible.

In addition to large signs and banners, there should be flyers printed and posted throughout the community. Whenever possible, market representatives should attend community events to hand out flyers and speak with prospective customers in person. The one-on-one interaction enables market reps to enthusiastically promote the market and answer any questions that should arise.

Should your budget allow, advertising on the radio and in print media is still a good way to reach and remind community members that the market is up and running. In addition to paying for advertising (or in place of depending on your budget), send press releases, solicit interviews with local print journalists and radio hosts, and post your market days/hours on community calendars.

Build partnerships with community organizations to get the word out – churches, schools, food assistance distribution sites, low income and senior housing offices, local chambers of commerce and other business associations. These groups can use their networks to help support your market. Consider planning events with some of these community organizations to build on the reach of each group.

Build your online presence through social media, an informative and engaging website and weekly e-newsletter. Use your online presence to promote events, highlight in-season produce and to communicate any market specials or changes with customers.

There are a number of ways to attract new customers to the market. Some markets find success in offering specials, discounts, coupons or “market bucks” to bring a friend. These offers can be an effective way to reach new customers. Incentives such as “Double Value” provided to federal assistance benefit holders of SNAP and/or FMNP are also an excellent way to bring new customers that otherwise might not shop at the market.

Planning special events geared toward both children and adults is another good way to attract new customers. This can turn weekly market shopping into family time that everybody looks forward to. Some examples of special events include music, cooking demonstrations, children’s art projects, family yoga, etc.

Partners

Partners are crucial to all markets, especially in the areas of recruiting volunteers, musicians, artists and of course to help promote the market. Consider partners that provide a special expertise or insight into a population you are encouraging to attend the market. Think through potential cross promotion or sponsorships of the market with community or state partners. You should also tap into national and regional organizations focused on improving farmers markets, such as Wholesome Wave and the Farmers’ Market Coalition. They have an abundance of resources to help build your market. Your location’s land/building owner should also be considered as a potential partner.

Benefits

WIC/SENIOR Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) Checks benefit farmers’ markets in a couple of ways. The checks can only be spent on fresh produce (and honey for Senior FMNP checks) purchased from a certified vendor at a farmers’ market, thereby creating an incentive for recipients to go to the market. They also serve as a marketing tool for the farmers’ market as they are distributed via food benefit agencies to individuals who may not have previously been aware of the market. Distributing flyers indicating market location and hours to be handed out with the checks is a good way to further promote your market.

Inclusive Culture

Inclusivity is perhaps one of the most crucial components of the urban farmers' market. There has been a recent discussion on the Wholesome Wave list-serve regarding the different methods market managers are using to ensure that their market is welcoming to community members from all income levels and ethnic backgrounds. The ideas generated from that discussion deserve thoughtful consideration from anyone running a farmers' market. Beyond offering incentives, the ideas include: recruiting bilingual volunteers to staff the info table, offering stipends for local community members to conduct outreach and advocate for the market in their neighborhoods as "Community Champions", hiring diverse musicians to play during the market, offering specialty ethnic foods, clearly displaying prices, and building meaningful relationships with clientele.

Inclusivity is also necessary for social media and websites for farmers' markets. A study of 41 randomly selected urban farmers' markets throughout the United States showed that only 51% of their websites showed people of color, and that only 17% had a translation option available. The same percentage, 17%, had a website that clearly indicated what types of food assistance benefits they accept (SNAP, WIC/Senior FMNP, etc.) It is vitally important that one of the faces of the farmers' market, the website, reflect the community that the farmers market is trying to reach.

Data

Being able to show results and anecdotes from season to season as well as compare data from week to week supports your market in innumerable ways. While some data is under market management's control such as customer counts and information gathered from a central terminal system, other data such as vendor sales depends on obtaining it directly from the vendors. Collecting data on weather, customer counts, customer reflections, SNAP redemptions and the number of vendors and activities for each day can all be done through market management. Obtaining vendor sales data and redemption of federal benefits such as SNAP and FMNP per day requires an agreement with vendors, and while surveys can be performed in the case that vendors do not want to directly report. Data like this can be extremely helpful in grant and sponsorship applications, as well as to confirm specific growth of market sales and customer spending patterns.