

Recruiting Producers

Farmers Market Management Tip Sheet #2



Introduction

Creating an atmosphere of variety and abundance is extremely important in building a successful farmers market. A diversity of farm products, including a variety of fruits and vegetables, nursery stock, cheese, meats, eggs, seafood, herbs, wine, breads and other processed products will encourage shoppers to do the bulk of their grocery shopping at the market.

Recruiting farmers can be challenging, particularly for a new market. Whether recruiting for a new market or an existing one, it is imperative to begin early and to use a variety of outreach strategies. This tip sheet covers the steps you can take to recruit vendors and expand the product selection at your market.

Identify Product Needs

To determine recruitment needs and opportunities, the manager must first identify product needs.

Start by **surveying the products** already in the market. A simple list of all products in the market and the quantities available along with the numbers of farmers carrying each product will help you see what is missing and what may be in short supply. Don't limit your chart to varieties of fruits and vegetables. Rather, think about all the food and plant products the average person might buy, including production methods (like organic) which are in high demand.

Next, **review the customer base** of the market and surrounding neighborhoods in terms of population size, ethnicity, and other characteristics that might impact what foods they're looking for. **Survey customers** by conducting a [Dot Survey](#) and ask shoppers what, if anything, they feel is missing from the market. **Observe customers** and listen for criticisms or questions exchanged with fellow shoppers and vendors. If you consistently overhear phrases like "Do you know where I can find some cheese?" or "Shoot! The eggs are all sold out again!" then it might be time identify new sources of those products.

Survey existing vendors to assess their interest in and capacity to increase production or diversify crops. You may save yourself the trouble of a recruitment effort if another vendor is one step ahead of you, already planning to expand into the very product you're seeking.



Identify Farmers

Recruiting farmers to expand your market's product offerings can be a time consuming and challenging task, but don't get discouraged if you don't immediately have farmers knocking down your door. The following are some steps you can take to locate and recruit vendors.

Create a one-page flyer/fact sheet that provides basic information about the market and the opportunities it offers, with an invitation to join your market. Your contact information should be included. **Visit other markets in your area** to assess vendors' willingness to sell at your market, but only after obtaining permission from the market manager, who has the right to decline. As a first step, request some referrals from their waiting list, if they have one. Make clear that you have no intention of "stealing" vendors away from their market, but instead wish to assess their willingness and ability to expand, and to recommend other farmers. **Connect** with, and provide your recruitment flyers to, as many of the following as possible:

- [County Extension Service](http://www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension/) (www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension/)
- [State Department of Agriculture](http://www.nasda.org/cms/7195/8617.aspx) (www.nasda.org/cms/7195/8617.aspx)
- [State Farmers Market Association](http://www.farmersmarketcoalition.org/resources/state-associations/) (www.farmersmarketcoalition.org/resources/state-associations/)
- Producer associations (e.g. Farm Bureau, organic/sustainable farming groups, etc.)
- High school vocational horticulture or agriculture programs like FFA or 4-H
- Urban gardening clubs
- Beginning, immigrant, or refugee farming programs

A quick internet search will probably help you locate some of these sources, while others may require a little bit of networking, or "asking around" in your community.

Reach Out to Farmers

Once you have a list of potential farmers and other producers to contact and you have prepared some “at a glance” information for them, now it’s time to actually connect with these farmers. The following are some strategies that can be employed.

Create a recruitment packet that includes, along with your “at a glance” flyer or fact sheet:

- Location, day(s), time, and season of the market
- Expected numbers and general demographics of customers
- Overall sales volumes per week, and average sale per customer
- Fees and other upfront costs
- Names of farms already represented at the market
- Methods used to promote the market
- Other requirements of the farmer (liability insurance, permits, etc.)
- Information about programs that might influence sales, (like EBT or other Nutrition Programs)
- A copy of both the market rules and the vendor application

Keep copies of this packet with you at the market so that interested vendors can obtain information immediately.

Conduct farm visits to learn about the potential new vendor and demonstrate that you care about their success as a farmer. Call to make an appointment in advance, arrive with an information packet to leave with the farmer, and be prepared to honestly answer questions about the market’s strengths (e.g. great location) and weaknesses (e.g. limited vendor parking). Be sure to offer your plans to improve on the weak spots. Follow up on your visit with a thank you phone call, card, or e-mail.

Exhibits at winter workshops are a great way to reach out to farmers. You can set up an exhibit in a resource fair or trade show at existing farmer workshops and conferences and showcase the opportunities at your market.

Invite farmers to preseason vendor meetings where producers learn all the details about the upcoming year, including the promotions and events schedule, any new rules and regulations, new programs and services, changes to fees, etc. Invite all potential farmers (even ones you have already contacted) to give them an opportunity to learn about your market, talk with the other farmers already involved, and make their decisions.

Offer Alternative Marketing Methods

If a farmer doesn’t feel that s/he would sell enough product to justify time spent at market, or the distance to the market is prohibitive, it may be necessary to find alternative methods to bring farmers’ products into the market.

Offer Split Stalls, which allow small-scale farm producers to share stall space. Each producer should be treated as a separate applicant and the criteria will apply as usual. Such an arrangement may work well for a collaboration of growers like an urban gardening club, youth farming programs, or two small farms in close geographical proximity.

Set up a General Store by purchasing a few high-demand, otherwise unavailable products wholesale from local farmers who are unable to sell at the market themselves. The market can then sell the products to consumers, promoting the local growers. It retains the “local” concept, builds product diversity, and can provide a revenue stream for the market. It also can be used to prove to the farmers that the market is an effective way to sell products, and may help convince them to sell the product directly themselves for full retail price. Be cautioned, however, that this strategy may make future enforcement of the vendor “producer-only” rule difficult.

Resources:

Visit the www.farmersmarketcoalition.org to locate resources in your state, and to search the FMC Resource Library for sample vendor applications, Dot Survey guidelines, and other recruitment resources.