

Recruiting Farmers to Your Market

Chapter 6: Happy Vendors, Happy Managers

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While some farmers markets in Washington State have too many farmers wanting to get in and have a waiting list, other markets need more farmers. This imbalance is partly a function of our state's geography. Some of our most expansive agricultural regions are hours from the greatest concentrations of people. It's also a function of "success breeding success." Well established markets, especially in metropolitan areas, have built up a dedicated shopper base and corresponding sales over years. Sales are not the only reason why vendors choose markets, but high sales can clearly make the job of recruiting farmers easier. What else can help you recruit the best farmers around to your market?

Your Homework

Know your market

Polishing an elevator speech on "why sell at your market" may be overkill, but having certain information at hand can help explain your market's potential to a new vendor. Farmers do research farmers markets. It's good to ask what is important to them when they are choosing farmers markets. What they say may surprise you. Below are a few market variables that may help entice a farmer to sell at your market.

Market mission: Is the goal of your market to support local farms? If so, this will be very appealing to farmers, of course. To feed your community? Many vendors value to opportunity to serve larger missions and may welcome this opportunity to contribute. To create a family friendly event? This may be a strong fit with farmers who have certain products or families striving to cook at home. Whatever your market goal or goals, think about how this relates to what the farm sells.

Investment in marketing: How does your market advertise? Does it participate in community events? Does it reach out to shoppers via a weekly fresh sheet that features vendors' products? All the effort your market makes to attract shoppers is a real plus because it shows your commitment to the market.

Experienced manager: If your manager has an excellent track record or special skill set, then this is a real asset to the market and draw to vendors.

Policy on resellers: What is your policy on resellers? Is the policy enforced? Few other topics get vendors as fired up as resellers. Having clear policies and sticking to them helps farmers know what to expect and allows them to plan accordingly.

Expected sales: Can you give a farmer any sense of what to expect in terms of sales? Do you have good data on your shopper counts? Do you know your average vendor sales per market day? Not only does this signal what to expect and how much product to bring, it also is an indicator of how sophisticated the market is at managing data.

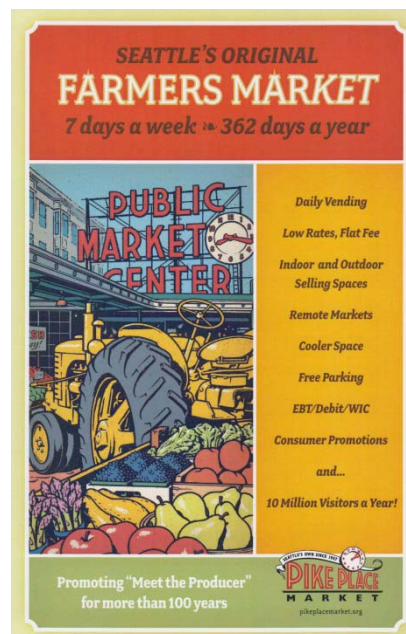
Description of shoppers: Are you a destination market with serious shoppers? Families or smaller households? Do tourists tend to come to your market? Are shoppers mostly bargain-hunters? Do they want bulk items to can? Or specialty items for that dinner party they're hosting? Is there an international or ethnic community that shops at your market? Does the market attract chefs or news or food writers? Each demographic is a niche market that will help farmers know if or in what ways the market is a good fit for their products.

Stall fees and any other payments: How does your market set its fees? Is there a membership fee? Is there a fee for power or other utilities? Such information helps vendors to estimate their expenses per market and evaluate accordingly.

Market policies and rules: Are the market policies and rules perceived as fair? Are they consistently and fairly enforced? Is there transparency about any changes?

Booth location within the market: Are vendor booth space locations in a market guaranteed? Does the vendor get to choose? How are the space assignments determined? On a related note, is it easy to unload and load at the market?

Special events: Does your market schedule special events to attract shoppers? Are vendors expected to contribute time or product to such events?



Pike Place vendor recruitment piece highlighting: daily vending, low rates, flat fee; indoor and outdoor selling; remote markets; cooler space; free parking; EBT/debit/WIC; consumer promotions and 10 million visitors.

Payment options: Does your market have a token program so that shoppers can use their credit or debit cards? Does your market accept FMNP and EBT?

Special perks: Does your market provide volunteers to help with set-up and take down? Does the market haul trash or compost? Can a farm have their CSA pick up at market? Not only do such perks help ease the physical toil, they also send a clear message of how a market treats and values their vendors.

Know what you are looking for in a farm vendor

Rarely do we get everything we want, but it still helps to think through what kinds of vendors and farmers would be the best fit for your market. Below are a few different ways of describing your ideal farmer.

Product category: Do you need a specific product category to fit with your target product mix (e.g. vegetables, tree fruit, berries, herbs, nuts, dairy, meat, flowers, grains, honey, etc.)?

Specific products: Do you need a specific product within the product category (e.g. heirloom tomatoes, tree-ripened peaches, raw milk, fresh meats, etc.)?

Product attributes: Does your shopper base desire or your market values prioritize specific product attributes (e.g. organic, no sprays, grass-fed, Salmon Safe, gluten-free, etc.)?

Geography: Does your market prefer farms or products from a specific area? This may be proximity to the market as in “local” (however defined), or known regions with a particular reputation for quality (e.g. Wenatchee apples, Walla Walla onions, Skagit berries, Yakima peppers, etc.).

Seasonality: Is the vendor available when you need them to be at the market

Involvement in the market organization: Do you prefer vendors that are able to become involved in leading your market organization?

Playing well with others: Is it important that the farmer (or any vendor) get along with the market manager and other members of the market?

Finding Farmers

Now that you have a compelling picture of your market to lure farmers, it’s time to find them.

WSU Small Farms and Community Food Systems Team: smallfarms.wsu.edu

There is a statewide Small Farms Team comprised of over 45 county extension and key statewide non-profit and agency partners. Everyone on the Small Farms Team works

with small farms in some way. Many are instructors for a class called Cultivating Success that is designed to help small farms improve their business skills. This network mainly communicates through a listserv and annual retreat. Go to <http://smallfarms.wsu.edu/about/team.html> and get to know your local member of the Small Farms Team.

Tilth Producers of Washington: www.tilthproducers.org

Founded over forty years ago, Tilth is the largest group of farmers dedicated to sustainable practices and engaged in direct marketing. In 2016, they merged with Seattle Tilth; however, many programs will continue, including Tilth’s an annual conference, quarterly newsletter, farm walks, website, active listserv, and online directory of member farms. There are also half a dozen independent, local Tilth chapters throughout the state.

- Craft an email for the listserv or call the main office and ask them to help you get the word out;
- Post to their online “classifieds” on their website;
- Ask the WSFMA to have flyers at their booth at the Tilth Conference; or
- For the more ambitious, take out an ad in the Tilth Quarterly newsletter.

Keep in mind this is a close-knit community and word of mouth is a powerful way to get the word out.

Regional Resources

Organization	Contact Information	Region
Gorge Grown Food Network	www.gorgegrown.com/gorge-markets.cfm (541) 399-2840	Serves counties in southern WA and Oregon along the Columbia River gorge.
Puget Sound Fresh (managed by Seattle Tilth)	www.pugetsoundfresh.org (206) 632-0606	Online and printed in the Puget Sound Fresh Guide. Includes farmers around the Puget Sound.
Rural Roots Local Food Guide	www.ruralroots.org (208) 883-3462	Serves Eastern WA and Idaho.

Hone your “farmer radar”

Visit roadside stands, U-pick operations, local butcher shops, local food stores such as co-ops, restaurants with local suppliers and ask for contacts, introductions, and then invite the producers. Farm maps and directories are also good way to find farms involved in direct marketing.



Don’t forget the power of word of mouth too! It might be from shoppers, vendors you already work with, or other market managers.

Communication

As a reminder, many farmers have a real seasonality to their work and life. The time of year you try to contact them makes a difference. If it's a beautiful spring day, forget it. If it's snowing, your chances improve dramatically -- unless, of course, they're in Mexico. Note that farm taxes are due on March 1.

Typically, farmers are not at a computer for most of the day. Email may work just fine; but chances are good that it will be intermittent. The key is to ask the farmer what the best way to get in touch is to make it easier to connect.

Additional Resources

Farmers Market Coalition's Tip Sheet on "Recruiting Producers"

http://farmersmarketcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/FMC_Tipsheet_Recruiting_Producers.pdf

Farmers Market Coalition's Webinar on "Markets as Business Incubators: Strategies to Grow Your Vendor Base" <https://farmersmarketcoalition.org/resource/markets-as-business-incubators-strategies-to-grow-your-vendor-base/>

Wallace Center at Winrock International's "Recruiting Vendors for a Farmers Market" http://www.wafarmersmarkettoolkit.org.wafarmersmarkets.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/RecruitingMembersforaFarmersMarket_WallaceCenter.pdf