

Nebraska's Farmers' Markets

Managers Perspective on Nebraska Farmers' Markets

This past fall I conducted a survey of the fifty-nine Nebraska Farmers' Markets registered with the State Dept. of Agriculture. Responses were received from forty-three markets (74%). This is an outstanding rate of return. Thank you!! The number of new markets has increased by over 60% in the last 15 years, with close to half of those in the last five years.

The while 77% of the managers self-describe their level of involvement with the market as either "active" (49%) or "very active" (28%), almost one-fourth (23%) passively manage the market. However, when describing the responsibilities of the manager, some who indicated "passive" management did as much as those who saw themselves as "active" managers and some "very active" did not list any additional responsibilities than the "active" managers. I guess it is all in the perception of the manager – and a poorly worded question on my part.



Years	Number	Percent
less than 5	10	24%
5 to 10	9	21%
11 to 15	8	19%
16 to 20	6	14%
more than 20	8	19%

In 54% of the markets, the market manager indicate that the number of customers is increasing but only 28% say they have seen an increase in the number of vendors. Some markets indicated that getting new vendors is a problem.

So there appears to be some real opportunity for people interested in direct marketing. Over 91% of the markets are at least holding their own in terms of customers and vendors.

About 85% of the market managers would use promotional material if it were available to them.

Almost half the managers would like to have a yearly conference or meeting where they could exchange ideas with other market managers. I will work toward this in cooperation with several interested county extension educators. For several years I sent out periodic newsletters specifically for market managers but due to other constraints, stopped doing this. The overwhelming majority (94%) found the information I provided helpful and would like to receive this type of communication either by e-mail or regular mail. So that will also be added to my list of things to resume.

The complete summary of responses, including comments will be on my web site shortly — all anonymous, of course. <http://hort.unl.edu/hodges/extension.htm> Or you can request a copy be sent to you by mail by contacting Laurie Hodges (402-472-1639).

— LH

Recruiting Vendors

Vendors are the lifeblood of a market. Getting them, keeping them, and keeping them happy are key responsibilities of the market manager and market board. There will always be some turnover of vendors as they get older, perhaps larger, or just move on to other activities. So the market must always be welcoming to potential new vendors and looking for more vendors. How to find potential vendors is a question often asked. The best ideas are come from other market managers! Here are a few tips:



Kids – they always are looking for ways to earn money. A single tart cherry tree produces far more than one family can use for pie and jam. Ditto gooseberries. Similarly many home vegetable gardens produce an abundance of tomatoes, squash, beans. . . . How to connect the kids, the produce, and your market? A few possibilities include: Contact the 4-H coordinator in your county. Contact the county Extension Office; Boy and Girl Scout troops may use it as a fund-raiser, incorporating the various skills toward merit badges; Churches, schools, local bulletin boards, and newspapers. These also help connect with adults interested in direct marketing. Don't forget retired folks. In some communities, these are the core of the farmers' market. In all your promotional

work for customers, be sure to include a statement telling potential new vendors who to contact. Offer reduced daily fees to youth under 18 who are the primary vendor in a spot or for first time vendors. Many markets have very inexpensive daily fees for a limited number of market days to entice those who just want to try it out and are not sure if they will be successful. After the vendor sees what's involved and the potential, the rate becomes standard with other vendors, either daily or seasonal.

Another way to locate potential vendors is through grower organizations such as the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society, Nebraska Fruit & Vegetable Growers' Association, the Nebraska Nut Growers Association, local garden clubs and specialty flower clubs. If you are near the state border, don't forget to contact comparable organizations in adjoining states. Lists of various growers and grower organizations are available through the Nebraska Dept. of Agriculture. Contact Casey Foster at 402-471-4876 or 800-422-6692 for the Guide to Nebraska Fresh Produce and other marketing support materials.



Some tips on how to encourage new vendors to participate in your market were provided by market managers in New Hampshire www.nhfma.org/2004-NHFMA-survey-summary2-htm.htm

If you have news you'd like to share or a question you'd like to hear answered by other managers, let me know by phone (402-472-1639) or e-mail message (LHodges@unl.edu) or mail 377 Plant Sciences, Lincoln NE 68583-0724.

The primary one is to let them know of the success of present vendors, customers, and the positive attributes of your market. Emphasize that many vendors start small and grow with experience and as they develop a base of regular customers. The reliability of the market dates and times with consistent management is an asset as is the ease of setting up a stand and the positive effect of multiple vendors – people like a choice! If you have the support or encouragement of the town, let this be known. Encourage local merchants to promote the market to potential vendors

just as the vendors spread the word about the local merchants. Reassure potential vendors that may be afraid of "regulations" that the rules are there so that the market is fair to everyone – vendors and customers. Let them know if the market has an advertising plan and promotions to attract customers. In short, give examples of the benefits to them of being a part of the market.

Markets that are open more than one day a week often are more successful in attracting customers and vendors. Many vendors at large Saturday markets would like to have a weekday market.

If you are currently only open on Saturday morning, try a late afternoon or evening market during the week. This opens opportunities for “soccer-Moms” and other busy people to purchase locally grown produce and baked goods during the week to be enjoyed on the weekends.

Market Newsletters

Sometimes it is interesting to see what other markets are doing, how they promote themselves, maintain contact with customers, and the selection of items available at the market. The following are two outstanding markets with E-mail newsletters available free. I think you'll find them interesting.

Dane County Farmers Market : A well-established community market around Capital Square in Madison, Wisconsin. To subscribe to the market news, go to the market website at www.dcfm.org to sign up. Once you are connected to the website the link is located on the left hand side of your screen.

Dupont Circle Farmers' Market: A relatively small but high-end Sunday market in Washington, DC managed by the National Farm Trust. Serves local residents, educational displays to inform customers about farm and food issues. Business increased so much for local merchants and restaurants that they personally deliver fresh coffee and pastries in gratitude to the vendors while setting up the market. www.freshfarmmarkets.org

Tip for Vendors

Bungee cords have many uses! Run a cord through a roll of produce bags and hang by placing the hooks over a horizontal tent pole. This makes it easy for the vendor or the customer to pull off bags as needed.

Market Tip

Customers buy more if they know they can leave purchased items with the market manager and have assistance in taking items to the car. We all know how tempting everything is at the farmers' market! The Central Portland Farmers' Market is very customer-friendly. A “veggie valet” also allows the vendor to stay at the booth making more sales.



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