



CHAPTER TEN

Tips for Successful Farmers Market Vendors

After the Harvest

Vendors work hard to grow and produce quality products. However, since they are direct marketing to consumers the work does not end at harvest. In some ways, harvest is just the beginning for a farmers market vendor. A successful vendor must “wear many hats.” He or she must be part farmer, part accountant, part marketing specialist, part salesmen and part volunteer. It takes a talented person to fill each of these vital roles. This chapter provides practical advice for vendors to improve the skills needed after harvest and at the market.

Setting Up at the Market

Location

Some vendors believe their location within a market is important for high sales. There are many theories when it comes to stall location. Some say it is good to be located at the front where customers will see your stand first. Others disagree: what if customers want to look around before purchasing? They might not make it back to the first stall to make a purchase.

A better strategy for selecting a stall location is simply consistency. Show up at the market week after week and set up in the same location. Customers will remember where they bought produce that they enjoyed. If you are located in the same spot, repeat customers can easily find you.

Display

Create a sign for your farm. The sign should list the farm’s name, location and contact information. The goal is to establish credibility and make the stall instantly recognizable

to customers. It also helps them feel personally connected to your farm, which is one of the reasons many customers prefer shopping at a farmers market. One or more pictures of your farm can enforce that personal feeling.

Use tables to keep produce up off the ground and at a good level for customers to see and inspect produce. In addition to tables, consider building or buying vertical displays. Using hanging displays and stacking containers can help take advantage of all space in within your location.

Consider setting up a tent at the farmers market for your stall. This can help keep you more comfortable on hot days and keep produce or baked items shaded. Be sure to secure the legs of the tent with cinder blocks or anchors to stabilize the tent in windy conditions.

Consider pulling color into the stall layout, arranging products by color or picking a theme for your stall. This can add character to the stall and create memorable appeal.

If produce is stored in boxes, crates, or totes, prop them up and tilt the container toward the customers for better visual appeal. Neutral colors are best for the containers, as they help make the produce color “pop.” Create an illusion of abundance by using small containers and allowing the product to “spill over.” This will help to support the idea that the produce is fresh high quality. A half empty container suggests that you are running low and the high-quality items have already been purchased. For food safety’s sake, use containers that can be cleaned and sanitized. If wooden boxes are used, line them with plastic liners, or cloth that is washed after every use.

Creating a visually appealing stall is not expensive; it just requires a little extra effort and creativity. After all of the hard-working planting, weeding and harvesting your products—why not display them in a way that increases your sales?

For more information on creating attractive product displays review the University of Vermont’s Extension publication *The Art & Sciences of Farmers’ Market Display* in the resources section following this chapter section.

Product Signs

Some customers do not mind inquiring about products, but many do not like to ask. If an item is unmarked, they may walk away rather than feel ignorant or rude while asking about the price or use of an item. To make customers comfortable, use a bold label with the price and item name. If it is a unique product that customers might not be familiar with, include a short description:

- “Large, easy-to-peel garlic”
- “Chocolate Cherry Tomatoes – extra sweetness”
- “Sweet Salsa, for those who don’t like spice”

Simple descriptions can help introduce a customer to a new type of produce. They show that you know your product, and they might also serve as a conversation starter. Interesting descriptions can pique the customer’s interest and keep them at your stand long enough that they decide to purchase some of your products.



Market display at the Letcher Farmers Market. SDSU Photo by Kari O’Neill.

Transactions

If the market is fairly busy, determine the simplest unit to make transactions as fast as possible. For example, consider selling beets by the bunch instead of by weight. Customers can pick up the bunched product and read the labeled price. This method is called unit pricing; it allows for simple calculations and quick transactions.

Keep in mind the process of selling by weight can take longer: the customers need to ask the vendor to weigh a pile of beets and adjust the quantity before determining the exact price.

Vendors will have to decide which method, unit, or weight pricing, is most effective given their products, market, and profit margin. Because paper money can carry a number of bacteria or viruses, it is best if one person handles sales while another bags the produce. If this is not possible, gloves may be used, changing between tasks, or at the very minimum, using hand sanitizer.

Cleanliness & Quality

Keep in mind fancy décor and large signs may not impress customers if the produce for sale is disorderly, dirty, or poor quality. This point cannot be over-emphasized. Taking time to clean and properly prepare product for market can be a simple, but important selling point at the market.

Keep all display surfaces as clean as possible throughout the market time, and make certain that all salespersons are wearing clean, unstained clothes. If you bring your small children to the market, prevent them from handling the displayed produce.

Sample products can draw customers into your stall or booth and provide a conversation point. It can be an excellent way to introduce new customers to the quality of your products. First, make sure that free samples are allowed at your market. Be sure to follow the minimum sanitation guidelines when serving samples. For more information on the SD Dept. of Health guidelines for food samples at farmers markets, see Chapter 9.

Persona of Salesperson

What qualities can help improve the success of a salesperson at a farmers market? Exploring these qualities can help improve your sales numbers and bottom line.

Approachability

Try not to sit in the back of your stall focused on something other than selling your produce. Be up front, standing for as long as comfortable and ready to greet customers with a smile.

Friendliness

Greet all potential customers. Try to learn their names and then greet them by name the next week. Talk with your customers and give them a chance to ask questions. Attempt to gauge the customer's interest level in your operation. If they seem interested, be friendly and open about sharing your production practices and answering questions. However, if they seem rushed consider being briefer in your descriptions. Try to get a sense of how much each person wants to engage in small talk. Be patient, listen carefully, and be persistent in order to make a sale.

"I love talking to people ... sometimes there are people from all over the world."

– Jessica Berndt, De Smet Farmers Market Vendor.

Customer Service

Providing good customer service builds loyalty. When a return customer visits your stand, ask about their experience with your product to make sure it was a positive one. If it was a negative one, try to find the source of the problem. It might be that their negative experience was related to storage or preparation. Did they leave produce in the hot car? Did they cook it too quickly or slowly? Or was the product under-mature or over-mature?

While dealing with complaints keep in mind this seller's motto: the customer is always right. Do not argue with a customer but receive complaints in a professional manner.

Be courteous and try to view their complaint as a way you can improve. Thank them for telling you about their negative experience and offer a refund or different product.

Another aspect of good customer service is being knowledgeable about your products. Be prepared to explain how to prepare, cook, use, or store what you have for sale. This will help develop your credibility as a vendor and customers will appreciate the advice.

Internal Communications

Throughout the season, vendors should strive to maintain some type of scheduled communication with the market management and other vendors. This communication should occur at each scheduled market. You will be more successful if they are aware of important news at the market such as dates of additional markets, time changes, signage, or special events. Focusing on internal communication can also serve as an opportunity to present ideas or suggestions as to how to improve the marketplace or improve the customer experience (1).

Product Pricing

Pricing products can be a tricky issue. First, you need to know your costs. In farming, this can be especially challenging. Consider the following factors: production, harvest, transportation, time, inputs, market dues and fees.

Consider keeping records on the following trends:

- What sells out the fastest?
- What sells the slowest?
- What sells in the greatest quantity?
- What sells in the smallest quantity?

Tracking this information can help you realize trends you may not otherwise notice on a day-by-day basis. Paying attention to the data can help you decide what crops to bring to market and what to plant more or less of during the next year.

One piece of wisdom that applies to pricing products is: charge what the market will bear. Look at prices in the grocery store, keeping in mind that your potential customers are aware of these prices. Compare to other vendors who sell similar products. Figure out what customers are willing to pay for a product; some vendors in South Dakota have found this price is often higher than they expected. Some markets have a section in their market rules dedicated to product pricing. Be sure to check the market rules to ensure that you are in compliance. Vendors who do not depend on produce sales should not undercut fellow vendors who are trying to make a living from their sales, as this will harm the market in the long run. If someone has excess produce that they are willing to sell very cheaply, it is probably better for them to supply a local food bank or free meal program.

Keep in mind; pricing is not a one-time decision. Vendors may have to “play” with the price a bit before finding a price where both the vendor and the customer are satisfied.

Pricing Certified Organic in South Dakota

Consumer demand for organically produced goods has shown double-digit growth for well over a decade. This has provided market incentives for vendors to consider getting the certification. Yet, how much more can a vendor expect to charge for a certified organic product?

According to research from the Economic Research Service in 2005, two thirds of certified organic produce is less than 30% higher than the conventional price. To find this number, they analyzed the prices for 18 fruits and 19 vegetables. If you are certified organic, consider looking at the prices of other organic producers who have similar products. Visit a grocery store or online website that carries organic products to compare prices.

Remember, you cannot label your produce as organic unless you have met all the requirements for certification, including record-keeping and written farm plans.

Vendor Insurance

Farmers who want to become vendors need to seriously consider potential liability issues they may encounter as a result of this new venture. Most farmers have a farm liability policy. However, this policy may not cover the farmer while he or she is selling at the farmers market. The simple way to answer this question is to speak with the insurance agent who sold the current farm policy. Most likely, a vendor will receive one of two answers from their current agent.

1. The current farm liability policy “follows” the farmer to the farmers market premises and he or she has sufficient liability coverage for the farmers market. If the farmers market requires that the vendors have a proof of insurance, a vendor can ask their agent to provide a certificate.
2. The current farm liability policy does not cover the farmer when he or she is off the farm premise. In this case, a vendor would be wise to purchase an additional commercial policy, or add a rider to the current policy.

It is strongly recommended that all vendors carry a policy that will cover both product liability and other types of liability. The recommended minimum amount of coverage is \$1,000,000. Some recommend \$2,000,000 or more. Remember, if there is a food-borne illness traced back to a vendor or market, vendors could risk losing all their assets. If a vendor has no liability policies at all, it is recommended to talk to several different agents before purchasing. To get a good policy, which will cover all aspects of a vendor’s needs, be sure to ask the agent questions regarding specific concerns. A good insurance agent will help vendors customize a policy to fit specific coverage needs.

Nutrition Education

The goal of increasing nutrition knowledge and willingness to try new produce increase consumer’s consumption of fruit and vegetables across South Dakota. Some people may lack knowledge in how to clean, cook, serve, or store certain foods, particularly fresh produce. With the Pick It! Try It! Like It! stand, trained staff can provide a face-to-face conversation about produce as well as free samples, nutritional information handouts, and recipe cards. The more learning and hands-on experiences available, the more responsive and excited customers will be about consuming more fresh fruits and vegetables.

Pick It! Try It! Like It! (PTL)

Most foods can be considered part of a healthy and well-balanced diet, however, the Pick It! Try It! Like It! program focuses on fruits and vegetables. PTL materials are filled with tips for selecting, exploring, and cooking a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. Factual information complements simple, healthy, and tested recipes. Colorful fact sheets, recipe cards, and educational videos provide educators and families with fun, engaging tools to enhance any dietary curriculum! These materials are appropriate for late elementary-aged children through adults and can be used in a variety of settings from schools to farmers markets.

Managers at farmers' markets have the opportunity to feature PTL resources in their produce sections. For example, placing the 'Broccoli' recipe cards by the broccoli itself. Providing samples of a featured fruit or vegetable, along with the recipe, can increase program impact, and is a great way to highlight produce that may be on sale.

Recipe Selection

Recipes selected should represent nutritious food from the Pick It! Try It! Like It! program. Pick It! Try It! Like It! (PTL), emphasizes the knowledge, usage, preparation, and storage of fresh fruits and vegetables. Recipes that are easy-to-make, healthy, tasty, and low-cost will enable individuals to increase their intake of fruits and vegetables to live healthier lives.

Recommended Practices

It is best to include as many of the materials and components of PTL as possible. For example, it is best to not only have PTL materials available next to produce in a grocery store or farmer's market, but to also provide samples of a recipe that is featured on those materials. If a recipe demonstration is not possible, you could continuously play the video of the recipe being prepared that is provided on the PTL website.

It can be helpful to highlight fruits or vegetables that are in season, or to place PTL materials by produce that is on sale or has a special running at a grocery store or farmer's market. These are the types of items individuals will be gravitating toward, and the materials are more likely to be seen. Additionally, placing recipe cards near the other ingredients (and not just the produce) gives shoppers one more place to view information about the produce being highlighted

Recipe/Materials

Educational materials are available via the SDSU Extension website and are free of charge to download (extension.sdstate.edu/pick-it-try-it-it-preserve-it).

Costs would be associated with printing of any materials and for supplies and food costs related to produce sampling.

Recipe Preparation

The following guidelines will aid in properly preparing any recipe for a farmer's market.

Who can prepare the food? Any person involved in the farmers market including nutrition professionals, managers, vendors, or volunteers as long as they follow safe food preparation practices.

When do I prepare the food? Preparing the food the day prior to the market would be beneficial. This would give you more time for preparation the morning of the market. Ensure safe storage and transport methods are used after completion of the recipe.

Where do I prepare the food? Prepare the food in a sanitary, up-to-date, and accessible kitchen. Follow all food safety instructions and regulations. A commercial kitchen is also appropriate.

Volunteers

Volunteers are among our most-treasured resources at SDSU Extension. They help bridge the gap between research and community knowledge throughout South Dakota. With over 800,000 residents to serve, we seek out passionate individuals to help us accomplish what we cannot do alone. SDSU Extension volunteers participate in a variety of service programs through our organization, helping us expand the scope and effectiveness of our mission. In exchange for their service, volunteers receive training on a wide array of topics of interest to them, experience increased life satisfaction and well-being, and have the opportunity to build their resume.

Master Volunteers

The term “Master Volunteer” is bestowed upon individuals that complete SDSU Extension training in a specific discipline and make a volunteer service commitment. Master Volunteers then use what they have learned to facilitate Extension educational programming in their communities, sharing their expertise and providing services to South Dakota’s citizenry. Master Volunteers can be a great asset to farmers markets by providing expertise to the public.

Master Gardener Volunteer Program

SDSU Extension’s Master Gardener program develops gardening enthusiasts into expert volunteers who share their research-based knowledge with citizens across the state. Each year, Master Gardeners volunteer thousands of hours answering citizen questions and hosting community programs. Master Gardeners are able to staff displays at events, such as farmers markets.

Master Food Preservers Volunteer Program

Home food preservation is a way to preserve the freshness of homegrown or locally purchased foods. With rising levels of food insecurity, food preservation is not only important but can serve as a solution to food challenges. SDSU Extension’s Master Food Preserver program equips food preservation enthusiasts with the knowledge to extend the golden rules of food preservation. Master Food Preservers are also able to staff displays at events, such as farmers markets and help disseminate research-based food preservation information.

Interested?

Looking to enhance your farmers market and see if a Master Gardener or Master Food Preserver is in your area? To learn more about SDSU Extension’s volunteer programs, visit extension.sdstate.edu/about/volunteers.

Celebrating Success

When the market season closes for the year, it is important to plan a celebration of some type, such as a potluck meal. Organizing a potluck meal or snacks with the other vendors at the market. Additionally, consider organizing a meeting with your staff and family members who are involved in the business. Use these times to celebrate the successes of the season. Build in some time for reflection that will be useful to the planning of next year's marketplace or business. There are likely some valuable experiences that you can use to help improve the market or your business in the future (2). Vendors are busy from the first planting until the last harvest; taking time to celebrate the work completed can help begin the preparation for the next season. Applying the concepts described in this chapter will help improve your success selling at a farmers market.

Lastly, you can also click on the link to go to the University of Vermont's Extension page on, "[The Art & Science of Farmer's Market Display](#)".

Sources

1. Trautman, Karla. "Unit 9, Lesson 2." Local Foods: Food Safety and Marketing Strategies. South Dakota Cooperative Extension Service, 2009. CD.
2. Trautman, Karla. "Unit 9, Lesson 1." Local Foods: Food Safety and Marketing Strategies. South Dakota Cooperative Extension Service, 2009. CD.