

Why Farmers' Markets Succeed and Fail

Many farmers' markets enjoy great success, while others struggle to stay afloat. It's kind of the chicken and the egg concept when trying to operate a sustainable farmers' market in rural Iowa. People are less likely to attend a farmers' market with very few vendors and vendors are reluctant to sell at a market with very few people. Upon doing some research, I've come up with a list of characteristics that accompany successful farmers' markets versus failing ones. Hopefully these tips will help your farmers' market thrive!

SUCCESSFUL FAREMRS' MARKETS ENACT:

- ❑ **A Producers-Only Market.** In keeping with the true spirit of farmers' markets, many successful markets operate a producers-only market, meaning vendors can only sell products they've grown or produced themselves.
- ❑ **Good Management.** A successful market is dependent on a manager who is committed to his/her job and who **wants** to be there.
- ❑ **Activities.** Getting people to the market can be tricky. It's not just about the food, but the overall experience. Entertainment, whether it's food demonstrations, kids' activities, live music or dancers from the local dance studio, creates an energetic and welcoming environment that lures patrons in.
- ❑ **A Convenient Location.** The market should have adequate shade, bathrooms within walking distance and convenient parking.
- ❑ **Diversity of Products.** Variety is the spice of life. The more variety you have, the more successful your market will be! Produce, eggs, meat, baked goods, honey, nursery stock, value-added products like jams and salsas and freshly cut flowers represent the ideal spread for a successful farmers' market.
- ❑ **Marketing.** In order to drum up business, you need to advertise your farmers' market consistently. There are many ways to advertise for free: put up flyers in town at banks, gas stations, restaurants, daycare centers, hospitals, churches, etc. and in surrounding towns. Ask to be interviewed by your local radio station to talk about the farmers' market. Contact area newspapers to write a feature story about your farmers' market. Write editorial letters to local newspapers. Put out farmers' market signs throughout town on the day of the market at major intersections. Ask banks if you can advertise on their electric sign boards. Ask local businesses to promote your market to their employees by putting up flyers in the break room or by mentioning your market in their monthly newsletter. Promote your farmers' market on social media and keep your followers engaged by frequently posting and asking questions like, "what's your favorite veggie to



purchase from the farmers' market?" Ask followers to take pictures of a meal they made from ingredients purchased at your farmers' market.

- Surveys/Data Collection.** By distributing surveys to vendors and consumers, you are able to collect vital feedback regarding your farmers' market and make improvements and corrections from there. Data and survey information can not only be used when applying for grants, but it can be used to further local food policies in Iowa.
- Fair and Enforceable Rules and Regulations.** It's important to establish rules and have vendors sign an agreement, so both the farmers' market and vendors are clear on their obligations.

Rules can include:

- The types of vendors that are allowed
 - Is your market a produce-only vendor operation or do you allow vegetables purchased from produce auctions?
 - Do you allow crafts at your farmers' market and if so, are they required to be handmade?
 - Do you allow peddlers at your market? These are people who buy products wholesale and then sell them for retail?
 - If your market starts at 4 pm, can customers still purchase before the market officially starts?
 - If you are a produce-only market, will you require a visit to the farm to verify that the vendor actually grew his/her own food?
 - Does the farmers' market have liability insurance to cover the vendors? If not, will you require vendors to carry their own insurance?
- Community Partners.** Community partners can serve many purposes. A community partner can sponsor farmers' market advertising or even sponsor the market manager's salary for the season. They can volunteer to do an activity at the farmers' market; for example, your local library can come and read a book to the kids about gardening; Iowa State Extension can host a craft table for kids; or the hospital's dietician can conduct cooking demonstrations.

FAILING FARMERS' MARKETS TEND TO HAVE:

- Not Enough Vendors
- A High Need for More Products
- Low Administration Revenue
- Volunteer or Low Paid Manager
- High Manager Turnover

Southern Iowa Local Foods Initiative, under the umbrella of Southern Iowa Resource Conservation and Development Area, Inc., is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization. This document has been made possible by The Farmers' Market Promotion Program grant for our Growing Farmers and Farmers' Market Project.

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