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# Promoting Farmers' Markets: Preferences of Farmers' Market Leaders

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# Promoting Farmers' Markets: Preferences of Farmers' Market Leaders

**Abstract**

Extension professionals across disciplines are involved with farmers' markets, and reports have indicated an increase in the number of farmers' markets across the country. We explored perspectives of farmers' market leaders regarding topics and data of interest and capacity and willingness to collect data related to market promotion. The purpose of our work was to provide Extension educators with information that may guide programming around farmers' markets. We collected data through an online survey of Wisconsin farmers' market leaders in spring 2017. Market leaders were most interested in learning how to encourage word-of-mouth communication between customers and engage in other low-cost strategies, such as having partners help promote a market.

**Keywords:** famers' market, farmers' market manager, local food, marketing

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## Introduction

Farmers' markets are important to Extension educators who focus on a variety of program areas. For example, with economic development in mind, Extension educators have helped establish new farmers' markets (Civittolo, 2012). Other Extension educators have incorporated farmers' markets into 4-H programming (Meyer & Jones, 2015) or supported programming that encourages families to make healthful food choices through the use of farmers' markets (Norman, Moore, Mattfeldt-Beman, Kelly, & Barlow, 2018). Working with farmers' markets may appeal to Extension educators because markets are present in many communities. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) (2016) has reported increasing numbers of farmers' markets in the country, with as many as 8,687 markets nationwide.

Despite the popularity of farmers' markets, a relatively recent national survey indicated that about a third of farmers' markets had not experienced season-to-season increases in customer traffic or sales during a particular snapshot in time (USDA, 2015). This situation may be due to an increasingly competitive landscape for farmers' markets, as in some areas local foods also are available at grocery stores or through community-supported agriculture. The fact that many markets are not experiencing increases in sales also suggests that some markets need help with promotion. In fact, farmers' market managers participating in a national survey rated "advertising/publicity" as the top area in which they needed assistance (Ragland & Tropp, 2009).

Researchers have not examined more specifically what farmers' market leaders need or want when it comes to market promotion. Consequently, we took a deeper look at promotion-related interests of farmers' market managers and other market leaders, including farmers' market directors, board of directors members, and other individuals who make guiding decisions about a farmers' market. The information we obtained could be helpful to Extension educators as understanding more about an audience's interests is an important step to take when preparing educational programming and can improve the return on "outreach investment" (Wolde et al., 2018).

There are myriad ways farmers' market leaders might promote their markets, ranging from signs in downtown areas to paid social media posts. Some research has pointed toward an interest in online promotion of markets. Most farmers' market managers surveyed by the USDA (2015) used some kind of online technology for communication with important stakeholders such as customers or vendors. Of the managers using online technology, the majority used social media (USDA, 2015). Similarly, in a survey of farmers' market organizers in Missouri, researchers found an interest in social media (Fleischmann, Hendrickson, Parcell, & Roach, 2010). At the same time, finances are likely an issue when it comes to promotion. In one study, researchers found that the median amount for annual advertising expenditures for farmers' markets in the United States was $500 per year (Ragland & Tropp, 2009).

Although research on farmers' market leaders' promotion-related needs is limited, previous research has addressed other issues related to farmers' market promotion, such as farmers' market consumer characteristics. For example, consumers patronize farmers' markets to purchase high-quality fresh and local food, to purchase food that has been produced sustainably, and/or to support their communities (Byker, Shanks, Misyak, & Serrano, 2012; Dodds et al., 2014; Sneed & Fairhurst, 2017). Additionally, farmers' market patrons are more likely to cook or enjoy cooking and to be female (Byker et al., 2012; Detre, Mark, & Clark, 2010). Challenges to market use include inconvenience, higher pricing, and an unwelcoming atmosphere (Byker et al., 2012; Conner, Colasanti, Ross, & Smalley, 2010; Detre et al., 2010).

In sum, research about promoting markets has shown that there are distinct trends in consumers who are likely to patronize markets. However, to address a research gap, we aimed to describe the promotional needs of farmers' market leaders and developed four associated research questions. A primary goal was to determine what content areas would be useful to farmers' market leaders. Accordingly, our first research question was this:

> What topics related to market promotion are farmers' market leaders most interested in? (RQ1)

Secondly, we explored whether such preferences differed relative to key market characteristics, such as size or community type. Smaller market size can be a factor in market failure (Stephenson, Lev, & Brewer, 2008), suggesting that needs may vary according to market size. Previous research also has shown that markets in different community types have different needs (Wilson, Witzling, Shaw, & Morales, 2018). Consequently, the second research question was this:

> Does interest in topics related to market promotion differ among farmers' market leaders who represent markets of different sizes or in different types of communities (urban, suburban, rural, or small town)? (RQ2)

We also examined the interest of farmers' market leaders in having and collecting data about their markets. Data may inform targeted marketing to different consumer segments, help markets show their value to potential sponsors or other partners, and give market leaders other kinds of information about consumer preferences that could help them make decisions about market practices. Therefore, the third research question was this:

> What types of data are farmers' market leaders interested in having, and in what capacity would they be willing to collect such data? (RQ3)

Lastly, we considered whether there would be differences in data preferences based on market size or community type. There is a precedent for this potential, as one study showed that a greater proportion of larger markets conducted customer surveys (Karpyn, Kim, DaCosta, Gasinu, & Law, 2012). The fourth research question then was this:

> Do preferences for having and collecting data differ depending on market size or community type (urban, suburban, rural, or small town)? (RQ4)

## Methods

To investigate these research questions, we developed a survey with a focus on Wisconsin farmers' market leaders. In the survey development stage, we sought feedback from 12 practitioners who work with farmers' markets. These individuals were affiliated with the University of Wisconsin–Extension Community Food Systems Team, the Wisconsin Farmers Market Association, and REAP Food Group. Additionally, a farmers' market manager from another state tested the survey and provided additional feedback. The final survey consisted of 44 questions; however, in this article, we focus only on survey items relevant to our research questions. Question wording and response scales are included in the "Results" section herein. We obtained institutional review board approval for our work.

In the spring of 2017, we distributed an electronic version of our survey to farmers' market leaders using Qualtrics survey software. Instructions asked that a person in charge of managing the market take the survey. At many markets, this person would likely be a market manager, though at some markets the person could have another title or role. The Wisconsin Farmers Market Association and REAP Food Group distributed the survey via email. We emailed additional markets directly if those markets were listed publicly through the National Farmers' Market Directory that the USDA hosts online or the "Farmers' Markets of Wisconsin" section of the Travel Wisconsin website hosted by the Wisconsin Department of Tourism. A second reminder email was sent to potential participants.

The number of individuals associated with unique farmers' markets contacted for the survey was estimated at 242 after bounced emails were excluded. A total of 98 surveys were completed (40% response rate). Some surveys contained substantial amounts of missing data, leaving 86 surveys for analysis.

We used *t*-tests to compare the results from individuals associated with large and small markets. About half (51%) of the markets had 27 or more vendors and were considered larger markets. Markets with 26 or fewer vendors were considered smaller markets. We made the distinction between large and small markets on the basis of the median for our data. Though slightly different, our classification is also supported by USDA figures suggesting that in the north-central region of the United States (where our research took place), farmers' markets have an average of 28 vendors, or a median of 20 (Ragland & Tropp, 2009).

Respondents identified their markets as existing in communities of various types (urban, suburban, rural, or small town), and we used analysis of variance tests to compare respondent needs relative to those community types. We did not apply Bonferroni corrections given the exploratory nature of our work.

 

# Results

To provide context for results pertaining to the research questions, we included on the survey instrument questions addressing basic characteristics of the respondents and their markets. Most respondents, 74%, were market managers. Of those respondents, 16% also identified themselves as market directors. Of respondents who did not identify themselves as being market managers, 43% were market directors and 10% were assistant market managers. The remaining respondents identified themselves as holding a different position. Sixty-seven percent of respondents were female. The average age range of the survey respondents was 45–54 (respondents selected one of eight age range categories on the survey). Half of the respondents had been in their positions for 2 years or less.

On average, the number of peak-season vendors at farmers' markets addressed in the study was 40. Forty-one percent of markets were in small towns, 26% were in urban areas, 13% were in rural areas, and 12% were in suburban areas (the remaining markets did not report community type). The average marketing budget was closest to the survey category of "$3,001 to $6,000" per year, but the median was less, closest to the survey category of "$1 to $3,000." The response choices were "$0," "$1 to $3,000," "$3,001 to $6,000," "$6,001 to 9,000," "$9,001 to $12,000," "$12,001 to $15,000," "$15,001 to $18,000," and "Over $18,000." There was also a "Don't know" option. If respondents chose this option, they were excluded from analysis on this point.

RQ1 addressed topics related to market promotion that farmers' market leaders were most interested in. Means and standard deviations are displayed in Table 1. The most interest was in ways to encourage word-of-mouth communication about a market. This topic averaged the highest ($M$ = 3.9, $SD$ = 1.1), significantly higher than most other items. The next three most highly rated items—having partner groups mention the market in their promotions, having businesses sponsor the market, and making a strategic marketing plan—averaged significantly higher than the lowest rated 11 items.

**Table 1.**

Wisconsin Farmers' Market Leaders' Interest in Learning About Market Promotion Topics

| **Topic** | ***M*** | ***SD*** |
|---|---|---|
| Encouraging word-of-mouth communication between customers | 3.9 | 1.1 |
| Having partner groups mention the market in their social media, newsletters, or emails to their memberships | 3.5 | 1.2 |
| Having businesses sponsor the market | 3.4 | 1.4 |
| Making a strategic marketing promotion plan | 3.4 | 1.3 |
| Hosting special events at the market | 3.2 | 1.2 |
| Generating news coverage (writing press releases, building relationships with reporters, etc.) | 3.0 | 1.2 |
| Distributing brochures at local businesses or places in the community | 3.0 | 1.3 |
| Using Facebook effectively | 3.0 | 1.4 |
| Offering incentives such as coupons | 2.7 | 1.3 |
| Using other social media (Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, etc.) | 2.6 | 1.3 |
| Writing and distributing email newsletters | 2.4 | 1.3 |
| Making and maintaining a website or blog (other than a Facebook page) | 2.4 | 1.3 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Buying ads on Facebook | 2.3 1.3 |
| Making and buying ads or public service announcements for radio | 2.2 1.2 |
| Sending paper mailings to local residents | 2.2 1.1 |
| Making and distributing signage (household yard signs and/or signs throughout the community) | 2.1 1.1 |
| Making and buying ads in the newspaper | 2.0 1.0 |
| Making and buying ads or public service announcements for TV | 1.9 1.1 |
| Purchasing billboard space | 1.7 1.0 |

*Note.* Scale was 1 (*not interested at all*) to 5 (*extremely interested*).

RQ2 examined whether interest in topics related to market promotion varied among leaders affiliated with markets of different sizes and in different community types. Relative to market size, there was a significant difference regarding a preference for learning about making and maintaining a website. Leaders of smaller markets were less interested in this topic ($M$ = 2.1, $SD$ = 1.2) than leaders of larger markets ($M$ = 2.8, $SD$ = 1.4); $t(74) = -2.2$, $p$ = .032. There were not significant differences among leaders of markets of different community types regarding interest in topics related to market promotion.

RQ3 addressed preferences related to having and collecting data. Respondents rated their interest in having data about different topics in order to promote the market to different audiences (Table 2). Respondents were moderately interested in all topics. Respondents also were asked how interested they would be in an online program that would allow them to enter and analyze data about their markets. The sample average was the scale midpoint ($M$ = 3.0, $SD$ = 1.3), which corresponded to the response choice of "somewhat interested." Another survey question asked respondents about how much time they would invest in learning how to use software or other resources to help collect data (such as customer counts or sales) relevant to the market. There were six response choices that ranged from *no time at all* to *more than 6 hours*. The average response was closest to the choice of *1 to 2 hours* ($M$ = 3.3, $SD$ = 1.1).

Leaders of larger markets were more interested in having data about several topics compared to leaders of smaller markets (Table 2). This finding relates to RQ4, which examined differences in interest in having and collecting data among market leaders who represented markets of different sizes and community types. Although there was a trend for leaders of larger markets to be more interested in having data, there were not significant differences relative to community type. Also, there were not significant differences among leaders affiliated with markets of different sizes or markets located in different community types regarding interest in using an online program to collect data or the amount of time the respondent would spend learning to use data collection software.

**Table 2.**

Wisconsin Farmers' Market Leaders' Interest in Having Data to Promote Their Markets

| **Data topic** | **Market size** | ***M*** | ***SD*** | ***t*-test** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Vendor satisfaction with the market organization and management | Large | 4.4 | .64 | -4.1*** |
| | Small | 3.4 | 1.3 | |
| Whether customers feel connected to their community because of the market | Large | 4.3 | .70 | -2.9** |
| | Small | 3.6 | 1.3 | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Customer satisfaction with the market | Large | 4.2 | .90 | -2.3* |
| | Small | 3.6 | 1.2 | |
| Whether the market brings people to nearby businesses | Large | 4.2 | .81 | -2.8** |
| | Small | 3.5 | 1.2 | |
| How much customers buy at the market per trip | Large | 4.1 | .93 | -3.0** |
| | Small | 3.2 | 1.4 | |
| How often customers shop at the market | Large | 4.0 | .93 | -2.7** |
| | Small | 3.2 | 1.4 | |
| Vendor sales | Large | 3.9 | .94 | -1.4 |
| | Small | 3.6 | 1.2 | |
| Whether customers eat more healthfully because they shop at the market | Large | 3.9 | 1.0 | -1.7 |
| | Small | 3.5 | 1.3 | |
| Customer demographics (age, gender, ethnicity, etc.) | Large | 3.9 | 1.1 | -2.8** |
| | Small | 3.1 | 1.4 | |

*Note.* Scale was 1 (*not interested at all*) to 5 (*extremely interested*).
*$p$ < .05. **$p$ < .01. ***$p$ < .001.

## Discussion

In an effort to support the food systems work of Extension educators, we investigated what market promotion topics farmers' market leaders were most interested in as well as their interest in having and collecting associated data. Furthermore, we examined differences in responses from market leaders affiliated with different types of markets. The information we gleaned constitutes a contribution to the broader understanding of marketplaces (Morales, 2009, 2011). Although we conducted our research in Wisconsin, our findings may apply elsewhere and serve as working hypotheses in other jurisdictions.

Regarding market promotion, farmers' market leaders were most interested in learning about encouraging word-of-mouth communication among customers. This finding corroborates other research results that have suggested a link between word-of-mouth communication and local foods tourism (Dougherty & Green, 2011). One way Extension educators might address interest in word-of-mouth communication is to offer programs about engaging audiences online in order to encourage electronic word-of-mouth communication. This strategy might include addressing how to create and manage social media content.

Additionally, encouraging customers to create user-generated content about a brand is a trend among businesses (Ashley & Tuten, 2014), and Extension educators could help market leaders strategize about how to motivate market customers to post market-related content. In a farmers' market context, this might mean offering customers a small discount, coupon, or free item for posting about their experiences at the market, photographs of meals they made with market products, or recipes they made with market products.

Market leaders also rated highly learning about having partner groups promote their markets, having businesses sponsor their markets, and making strategic marketing plans. Consequently, we recommend that learning opportunities for market leaders emphasize those topics as well.

We also recommend that resources focus primarily on low-cost marketing strategies, given the limited marketing budgets of many markets. We suggest exploring interest in promoting markets cooperatively on a regional basis as a cost-effective way for markets to advertise and stretch their limited marketing budgets.

Of note is that interest in learning about using Facebook ads was relatively low. This finding is surprising, given literature suggesting an interest in social media among farmers' market leaders. This method of promotion can reach targeted demographics (those associated with a particular geographic location or with interests in particular topics, such as cooking) and may be cost-effective. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, our findings suggest that market leaders see value in word-of-mouth communication, and Extension educators could play a role in showing market leaders that online ads and organic posts are worthwhile as they can encourage electronic word-of-mouth communication as well as effectively target different audience segments.

Although data collection can be an important marketing tool, there was only modest interest among market leaders related to using an online tool to collect data, and most would commit only 1 or 2 hr to learning how to use software to accomplish data collection. On the other hand, farmers' market leaders (particularly leaders of larger markets) did show interest in having data about different topics to inform their marketing. For the time being, leaders of larger markets might be the right audience for resources geared toward data collection. Leaders of smaller markets may feel that there is less of a need for them to collect data to inform their marketing, or they may feel that they lack the capacity to use data or act on findings. Nevertheless, Extension should continue to explore ways to make data collection accessible to market leaders, while keeping in mind that the average time commitment market leaders in our study were willing to invest in learning new software was minimal.

One limitation of our work is that our survey did not reach market leaders without email addresses; thus, less organized or less technologically savvy markets likely were underrepresented in our study. Another limitation is that not all respondents had the same title or role at their markets. Only including market directors or managers, however, would have resulted in excluding markets that were organized differently. At some markets, promoting the market is handled by someone other than the manager, such as board members, as we found in our data. Some respondents also reported that their markets were run without a manager or director position at all. A third limitation is that we had a relatively small sample size, which focused on Wisconsin. A larger sample size may have helped detect differences in preferences among leaders of markets of different community types. Furthermore, a regional or national sample would have made results more generalizable. Survey respondents also self-identified whether their markets existed in urban, suburban, rural, or small town areas; researchers conducting future work might use addresses to classify markets in a less subjective way.

We encourage researchers conducting future investigations to attempt to confirm our findings with a national sample. As Extension educators continue to support farmers' markets around the country, tailoring resources to the preferences of market leaders will be a topic of continuing importance in order to help sustain existing markets and develop new ones.

## Disclaimer

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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