

Some thoughts on selling at farmers markets

22 lessons in running a successful farmers market stand, from someone who's been in the business for almost 25 years ... starting at age 9.

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The RFC is a non-profit dedicated to developing the market for local foods.

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Posted May 11, 2004

In 1999, I created the first farmers markets in London, England. The first market opened with 16 farmers selling fruit, vegetables, meat, poultry, cheese, bread, plants and wine. Today, London Farmers Markets runs 13 farmers markets (12 are weekly) in London all year-round, serving about 115 farmers and food producers whose total sales at the markets are about \$5 million per year.

These suggestions for marketing at farmers markets were originally written for the farmers selling at the London markets. Most had no experience with direct marketing.

These ideas, revised for American farmers, rely on my experience selling at farmers markets in the Washington, D.C. area since 1980. My parents still make a living selling vegetables at farmers markets only. In 2003, we attended 14 farmers markets each week. My mother is a demon farmers marketer and I learned a lot from her. I am never happier than when I'm filling baskets, changing prices, talking about tomato varieties or what to do with fennel, and taking money. I also look at markets as a customer, cook, journalist, farm advocate, and market manager.

The Plancks are very good at marketing now, but we used to be hopeless. Farmers markets were new in our area in 1980. We had to figure out how to do everything. In retrospect, it's clear that we weren't quick. It was years before we displayed our produce attractively (see archival photos below). It was years before we wrote good signs—and laminated them so that they weren't ruined by rain. It was years before we stopped growing—and trying to sell—things customers didn't want.

Many of the examples below are about fruit and vegetables, but the principles apply to everything you see at farmers markets, including plants, flowers, and bread. I also include specific comments for meat, dairy, and poultry producers.

You are welcome to distribute this to market organizers, farmers, and food producers—or anyone else who is interested in the market for local foods.

These are things we know work well. We are still learning. Do what works for you.

1. The more information the better. Prices are the bare minimum.

Customers love signs and explanations. You must label everything with a name and a price. For some reason, food without prices doesn't sell well. Many people are too shy to ask directly about prices. But there is much more you can say.

How much does it weigh? How do you cook it? What is it called? How hot are the chillies? How is it different? Where is your farm? Why is it scarce? (WE HAD A FROST) Why do the apples have spots? (WE DON'T USE FUNGICIDES) One of my mother's most effective signs: WE GROW REALLY GOOD BEANS.

Suggestions for other handouts:

- Write a description of your farm (location, acres, ownership, family history, crops, animals, climate, workers). Write a description of your methods of production. Are you organic? What does integrated pest management mean? What does grass-fed beef mean? Why is it better than grain-fed? What breeds do you raise? Why? If you answer a question often, write it down. Save your time and help shy customers who will read a sign but won't ask you a question.
- Bring articles and information about your farm and its role in agriculture. When an agribusiness meat processor recalls tons of beef because of E coli, or E coli is found on organic lettuce, be ready to answer questions from customers. Tell them what you know about agriculture, food safety, or animal welfare. Good customers want to learn about farming and foods. You must help them.
- A brochure with cuts and prices is particularly helpful for meat, poultry, and cheese producers, especially when your prices and cuts are steady throughout the season.
- Recipes are the indispensable hand-out.

2. Charge what it's worth. Is it superior, rare, organic?

Better food is worth more. When you have a superior product (better than the supermarket or even the farmer next door), charge more. Some customers are price-conscious and some aren't. When you give away good produce at rock-bottom prices, customers often buy the same amount

anyway. The refrigerator is only so big and a family only eats so much.

If your product is rare (a scarce variety or the only one on the market), charge what it's worth. If your product is organic, price accordingly.

Customers do expect value for money. Give them bargains when you have a lot of something, or if it's inferior (too small or slightly bruised or too old).

When you do have a bargain price, promote it with large signs, visible placement, multiple locations, and polite suggestions.

Offer discounts for volume. We typically sell squash and zucchini for \$1.60/lb, or, when it's scarce, \$2/lb. That's not cheap. But if you buy 5 lbs or more, it's \$1/lb. We also sell slightly more than 5 lbs in a gallon basket for \$5. We move a lot of squash that way to price-conscious shoppers who like squash. We still get top price from the people who want just three zucchini.

3. Value for money is always right.

It's not a question of high or low prices. A good market—and a good stand—has high-end treats, less expensive foods in larger quantities, and items in between. It's a question of the right price. Your prices may change during the market, from week to week, and throughout the season. Don't be afraid to change prices. When you do, you must change the sign immediately and tell all your staff. It helps to make an announcement about a price reduction as you change the sign. People like to know.

If it doesn't sell, the price is probably wrong. Or the customer does not want that product, or isn't attracted by the way you're selling it.

4. Give samples.

People love to try things. Teach them about your favorites. If you're tired of Golden Delicious apples and prefer Mutsus, say so. Twenty years ago we started to teach people that pickling cucumbers are wonderful in salads. They have thinner skins and better flavor than standard American cucumbers. We kept searching for new varieties. Now we grow Armenian, European, and Middle Eastern types which are better yet. We sample them all and many people tell us they are the best they've tried.

I often give away a new variety, such as the fluorescent purple eggplant Neon, just to encourage customers to try unusual things.

5. Suggest ideas—especially when it's familiar or in surplus.

People often just don't know what to do with things they see. Tell them how you like to cook it. They often want to try something new, especially with familiar, well-supplied vegetables like zucchini.

When you have a glut, customers feel overwhelmed by the surplus and ever-lower prices won't inspire them. You must give them more ideas. Such as:

Go beyond zucchini bread! Try zucchini soup, zucchini pasta, zucchini frittata, grilled zucchini. For a simple and beautiful dish, peel zucchini with a vegetable peeler and dress with olive oil, lemon, parmesan and pepper—zucchini carpaccio.

Another good sign: HOW to MAKE the MOST of a SURPLUS. Here you tell them how to preserve things easily and on short notice. For example, when I come home with more fresh herbs than I know I can use in three days, I toss them in the food processor with olive oil and salt. Thick or thin, the herb paste is great on vegetables, bread, fish, poultry, and meat.

6. Eat your own food.

Nothing is more discouraging to me than hearing 'I don't know what it tastes like' from a farmers' market worker. All staff—those who work on the farm and those who only sell at farmers markets—should eat the food. Restaurant staff have wine and food tastings for staff so they can answer diners' questions fully and—yes—subjectively.

7. Give customers personal opinions.

You must be able to answer objective questions—is this apple sweet or tart, does this onion store well, is this cut of meat good for the grill? However, customers also appreciate personal comments. If you have favorites, say so. If the customer is asking about apples but you don't especially like apples, be honest ('I'm not a great apple eater, but people say these have the strongest flavor') and stick to objective descriptions ('Good for baking'). The customer will admire you for it.

8. Tell them how to keep it.

No one likes to waste good food (or flowers). If you tell customers how to keep what they buy

fresher longer, they won't fret about buying too much. For example, make a sign saying:

HOW to KEEP LETTUCE

Wash, spin dry, and wrap it in a damp kitchen towel in the fridge for several days.

9. Quality is everything.

Ultimately, farmers markets will not succeed simply because we are farmers and the folks down the road are not. They will succeed because the produce is superior to what consumers can buy elsewhere and the price is right. If your peaches are green or mealy, your corn is immature, your beans are tough, your meat is poorly packaged, your bread is stale, your lettuce is wilted, or your tomatoes are tasteless, customers won't come back. Taste your products. Do they measure up?

In a customer survey we've taken at a popular London farmers' market, freshness and quality were the top things customers volunteered in answer to the question: What's good about a farmers' market?

No other answer—not meeting the farmer, not saving family farms—came close. Customers did cite these (and other) considerations, such as organic foods. Value for money was also at the top. But freshness and quality were tops—and freshness is really a form of quality. Which means that quality and value for money are the main reasons people come to market.

We are lucky that farmers' market customers are discerning: that's why they shop at the farmers' market. But with regular exposure to fresh, seasonal, high-quality produce, they will become more discerning, not less. You cannot give them the same old apples week after week, or uneven quality, or bad prices—and expect them to come back simply because you are a farmer. They will shop elsewhere.

10. Choose good varieties and breeds.

Supermarkets offer the same cosmetically perfect bland foods, from apples to bread to cheese. We need to offer something better, and different. The sweetest strawberries, hand-made bread, pastry with real butter, raw honey, fresh eggs, marbled, well-hung beef.

I don't believe there is a better-tasting strawberry than Earliglow. It is smaller than other commercial varieties, and its season is early, but we charge more for Earliglows than most farmers do for varieties I find sour and watery. If you grow a good variety or raise a good breed with some noticeable downside (Earliglows are small), don't hide it. Explain it.

For processed foods, use good ingredients and tell customers why your jam or cheese or bread is different—it's hand-made, cured properly, or not treated with chemicals.

Flavor is the most important quality in food. But there are other ways to distinguish your product from the supermarkets. It should be fresher because it hasn't traveled far. It should be exactly the right maturity and texture—something supermarkets often get wrong because of transportation needs (hard pears, mealy tomatoes). Rarity itself can be a virtue. Grow traditional and unusual varieties and breeds.

If your product has any good quality—plum tomatoes makes thick sauce, a breed of beef is good on the grill because it's lean, a donut peach is easy to peel—say so.

11. Have something to sell all season.

This is especially critical for fruit and vegetable farmers. It's not worth coming to market only to sell asparagus for three weeks a year. To make a good return from markets, you need to have spring, summer, autumn, and winter crops. Extend the season with covers, by growing cold weather crops, or planting several batches of carrots for a steady supply of young carrots if they are popular. If you want to sell seriously at markets, you may need to change your growing patterns.

12. Sell a variety of products.

A stand with one product (only sausages, potatoes, or juice) holds the attention of customers for only a moment: either they want the one thing you have to sell or they don't. Sell a variety: many different vegetables, even in small quantities, flavors of juice, cuts of meat. Customers will stay longer and spend more.

13. Bags.

Place bags everywhere within easy reach of customers. Customers are blind when it comes to bags. This is a farmers' market mystery.

14. Work with the manager

If you have a problem or suggestion, tell the manager. Are the market hours right? Do you have requests from customers for something no producer is supplying? Tell the manager about your farm. The manager serves you and represents you to the public.

15. Cultivate regular, loyal customers.

We aim to build a base of customers who shop regularly at farmers markets. We don't want 10,000 one-time-only purchases from the occasional passer-by. We want 100 people to shop 100 times at farmers markets. Or 1,000 people to make 10 purchases. We want people to come to market to spend \$10 – 40, not \$2.50. That means people who are doing the weekly shopping at the farmers' market, often for a family, week in, week out. This usually means people who come for quality, not for rock-bottom prices.

You must remind customers that the market is open every week. Encourage them to bring friends, colleagues, family, and neighbors to the market. Tell them about other farmers markets you attend.

16. Pile it high and fill it up.

You must restock constantly. Consider carefully who takes money and who restocks at market. Some people are better at one job than the other.

The Smallest-Container Rule

The produce you have should always be in the smallest container in which it fits. If you start out with a crate of apples, keep it full throughout the whole market. If you have only half a crate left, find a smaller basket. By the end of market we often have one fennel bulb in a small basket, a few bell peppers in a quart box, squash in a gallon basket. Customers dislike buying the last of anything—it looks like the dregs. The smaller container looks like abundance.

17. Don't be afraid of competition.

A good market has a balance of producers with a balance of produce and prices. Good markets shouldn't have too many producers or too many large operations. For one thing, such markets become impersonal. There shouldn't be more producers than the customers can support, or more producers of one food than demand for it. But the best markets have plenty to offer customers.

Farmers markets are a basic form of cooperative. You all agree to sell by the rules for a few hours each week agree. You are stronger together than alone. Why?

Every market needs a critical mass of producers or customers won't bother to come to market. They'll go to the supermarket instead, where they know they can 'get everything.' To attract good customers, the pork farmer needs the vegetable farmer, the honey seller needs the baker, and the egg producer needs the fruit grower. Imagine how little business we would do if each stall were on its own street corner instead of all gathered together at the farmers' market! Regular customers especially expect to be able to do a full week's shopping. Regular customers spend more money than passers-by.

This also means that one vegetable or fruit stall is not enough. Customers want—and deserve—a mix of produce, prices and styles. No farmer is guaranteed a monopoly. It seems like a paradox: at market, the farmers need each other—and they also compete with each other. So how do you compete? Specialize. Do what you're good at. Tell the customers why you're different and better. Set your own standards. Always charge what it's worth.

We faced new competition in those early years, and we still do. If a farmer is out-selling, underpricing, or out-producing you, these are things you can do:

- **You can compete on price.** This has limited usefulness. Many farmers at the London markets know markets that collapsed under competitive price-cutting. The farmers' market has to work for all the farmers. Customers will not come to a market with only one stall still standing after a price war. Price-cutting for the sole purpose of grabbing market share—i.e., to drive the other producers out until you are the last one standing—is not the answer. It's anti-social, it rejects the cooperative spirit among producers, and in the long run, it's self-defeating. It does not mean that each customer buys more. It leaves every farmer with lower sales. It does not attract or maintain regular customers. It is the lazy way to compete—customers want freshness, quality, and value. Give it to them.
- **You can compete on quality.** You can stop using sprays or grow a better-tasting vegetable or even a slightly different product: in Virginia, we grew smaller melons when we were out-produced on the standard large melon by warmer farms with sandier soil. People living alone preferred a one- or two-serving melon. You could grow baby leeks or red lettuce instead.
- **You can sell that item at another farmers' market.** The more markets you attend, the more choices you have, and the better you will know what sells where, what competition you can beat, and what your niche is.
- **You can stop competing and sell something else.** Find your niche. You don't have to

grow what your neighbor is growing. Specialize and diversify.

- **You can perfect your act.** This is marketing. That means better signs, better sales, nicer and faster people serving customers, a better display, more recipes and samples. If you need to sell a lot of eggplant, put it in four places. Put produce in different boxes and baskets. Use creative pricing (not under-pricing).

In the long run, the answer to competition is stability. The goal at any farmers market serving producers and consumers. Ideally this is accomplished through a regional network of markets managed by the same organization. That means enough markets for the producers, enough producers at each market, and enough choice for customers. Each producer's business becomes more stable as the markets become more regular.

Stability doesn't mean that in five years you will be growing what you're growing today, or that customers will buy it. See the rest of these notes: you will grow new things, try new sales techniques, get more customers, and learn things from new producers. (There will be new producers.)

The early stages of a new farmers' market can be hard for everybody, including market organizers, producers, and customers. It is not stable from the very beginning. But it will be, if market organizers and producers are patient.

18. Make chilled foods visible.

Meat, poultry, dairy, and egg producers, and those selling chilled processed food like egg pasta, have particular challenges in display. You need to show off your food just as the peach and tomato farmers do, piled high and colorful and seductive. Sometimes a meat or poultry farmer seems to be selling nothing at all. There is a sign with prices—or should be—but no food in sight.

At many farmers markets, including London Farmers Markets, there is access to electricity. Farmers use chilled glass display cabinets, which look beautiful and allow them to sell fresh meat, sausages, meat pies, smoked fish, cheese, and more.

Meanwhile, most producers sell fresh or frozen meat from plastic cooler chests. No one can see the lovely foods. They can't choose their own. They can't browse without making a commitment, and they find that embarrassing. These are all barriers to more sales.

I admire the set-up of a buffalo producer, Cibolla, who sells at the Falls Church Farmers' Market in Virginia. Cibolla has created the sense of a butcher shop in the open air. They have created a U-shaped stand to invite customers in without making a commitment, so browsing is possible. Customers are invited to rummage through the plastic bins for frozen meat, so self-selection is possible. (Their marketing materials are also excellent.) One improvement they might consider: a nice color photo of each cut on the chest. The white plastic containers aren't very distinctive.

19. Bring photos of your farm.

Bring not only your food, but also your farm to market. Pictures of crops, animals, processing (say, making cheese), and workers with crops and animals are interesting and charming to non-farmers and bring life to your stand. Pictures also reinforce the message that we are all linked to farmland through food.

20. Be cheerful and active.

A bored, sullen person behind the counter is fatal. Without being a hyper sales-monster, be enthusiastic and friendly. You must move about the stand. Walk to the front of your stand every ten minutes for the customer's view. Pick up trash, even if it's not yours. You must demonstrate your high opinion of your products. You cannot be ignorant about products. You must give customers a reason to buy. Avoid sarcasm, indifference, smoking, music, and the impression 'I just work here.'

21. Perfect your marketing equipment.

Growing vegetables or raising animals is only half the battle. Do not neglect the infrastructure of marketing. Have a good sign box with magic markers, blank paper, tape. We organize signs by product in a small plastic recipe box. The PEPPERS file, for example, contains all the pepper signs (bell, hot, frying) with various prices and quantities. When you get to market, you need only choose the sign you need.

Our market report tells how much you brought, what price you sold it at, and when it sold out. When we're loading for next week's market, we have a good idea of what the market can sell. We refer to the market reports year after year.

Bring enough change to get you through the early \$20 bills. Experiment with tarps until you find the right one. Bring wet towels to keep lettuce from wilting in the heat. Use white side tarps to keep everything shady. Make sure every market has the baskets, boards, and tables it needs. (We use a check list.) Our marketing equipment is modular; it works at every market. Usually it has two purposes: it's part of the load itself and it becomes part of the display.

22. Some modest numbers.

Like most small business owners, farmers seldom discuss how much they make. My parents, Chip and Susan Planck, have always believed that the success of farmers markets depends on the success of farm businesses. We hope that by sharing information about sales, we can encourage more farmers to sell at farmers markets.

On August 29, 1999, my parents were in England to visit my first London farmers market in Islington. Our summer college-age farm workers selling vegetables at Dupont Circle, in Washington, DC made \$4800 in four hours. It was a market record (since surpassed).

- Among many other things, they sold 1250 lbs of tomatoes for \$2/lb—about \$2500, or half the total sales. They sold out of tomatoes.

Lesson 1: **Specialize.** (We grow 25 varieties of tomatoes.)

Lesson 2: **Grow the best varieties.** (If it isn't delicious, we don't grow it.)

Lesson 3: **Give samples.** (Our customers ask for tomatoes by name.)

Lesson 4: **Treat it properly.** (Our tomatoes are ripe and unbruised.)

Lesson 5: **Charge what it's worth.** (We are not fancy, but customers think our tomatoes are worth \$2.40/lb. Some of our prices are higher than the supermarket or the stand next door, some lower. Between you, the competition, and the customer, you learn what it's worth.)

- They sold 6 bushels of basil, about 180 bunches the size of two hands at \$2 each.

Lesson 1: **Grow what the customers want.** (We used to try to sell whole basil plants, with the muddy root and all the stems still on, for \$1. Now we cut just the leaves, wash and bunch them and make ten times more money per plant.)

Lesson 2: **Grow high-value crops** on small pieces of ground. (Basil is also light and small to carry to market.)

Lesson 3: **Grow something the supermarkets don't.** (Basil in supermarket pots dies before you can use it; the cut basil is old, over-watered and over-fed with nitrogen. It doesn't last and it's bland.)

The Plancks pay a fairly substantial fee at this market. We are glad to do it. With markets like this one—and thirteen others, including somewhat slower weekday markets—my parents are able to farm for a living. Average annual sales from 1998 to 2002 were about \$325,000 and in 2003, a bad year for weather, sales were a record high of \$350,000. (The biggest expense is labor, about \$110,000.) They sell only at farmers markets and have no other income. Farmers markets saved our farm.

That is why we have worked hard, not only to sell more vegetables, but also to convince customers and communities that farmers need a stable network of well-managed farmers markets in every suburb, town, and city. Every farm selling direct has different means and needs, but we all rely on convincing customers to buy local foods. It is notable how diverse farmers markets are. Many farms smaller and larger than ours—in acreage and sales—rely on farmers markets too.