

Ten Tips for Starting a Farmers Tailgate Market

ASAP receives many calls every year from people thinking about starting a tailgate market. Some calls come from farmers or organizations, but most come from property or business owners considering the idea either as a customer draw or as a beneficial use for an underutilized part of the property. As a result, we know there is great interest in starting markets.

We are certainly able to advise you personally as needed, but as a starting point, here are some tips that—through our years of work in this arena—we believe anyone starting a market should consider.

- 1. Evaluate the site objectively.** Market site selection can be complicated. Here are some things to consider:
 - Is it flat enough? If a tomato will roll off a table, there may be too much slope.
 - Is it big enough? While it's not always the case, vendors greatly prefer vending from a 10x10 or larger area directly behind their vehicle. A full-size pickup or van can be close to 20 feet long. So, ideally, assume a 10x30 space for each vendor. If vendors will be unloading and parking elsewhere, consider the space logistics of many large vehicles pulling in and out in the same 30 to 60 minute period.
 - Is it visible from the road, yet safe? The view of your market enjoyed by passing drivers is one of your best advertisements.
 - Is it festive and appealing?
 - Is there any shade? This is especially important for afternoon markets on asphalt.
 - Is there restroom access? While not preferable, you can get away with a site that has no convenient access for customers. A site with no nearby restroom and hand washing facility for vendors is a problem.
 - Will there be restrictions on what can be sold? Some sites restrict products due to concerns of small businesses sharing the same property or lot. Determine and communicate this from the beginning.
 - Will any site owner or organizational board member need to weigh in on insurance and contract issues? Clarify this first, before you begin talking your site up as a market location.
- 2. Know it won't happen fast.** Six months is a good amount of lead time (planning time?) for a modest market; 1-2 years for more of a "community flagship" market. Planning in the spring to start that spring can never work. Consider starting later in the year during year one. If you are starting a market in a new location this will attract customers who are new to the whole idea. You would rather make a first impression in late May or June when there is a good mix of vegetables available.
- 3. It takes significant management energy.** A market does not succeed by someone just making a location available and saying "come sell stuff!" This will often lead to a proliferation of non-local

product and a race to the bottom in pricing and quality. This is not what your customers want. Also, conflict is common among vendors at farmers markets, and there will be more in a vacuum of management and leadership. Running a market is just like running any business: it takes organizing, management, marketing, and people skills. If you are not the person who will take this role, you'll need to identify who that is.

4. **Finding the vendors is the hardest part.** Most markets are producer-only and aim to have a focus on farm vendors. That means you need a solid core of the “right” vendors – farmers selling what they grow or raise who are going to stick around through the early stages of your market’s development. When you first open a site to potential vendors, you’ll get lots of calls from crafters, herbal products businesses, home bakers, and so on. These are fine supplemental vendors for your eventual market, but you can’t commit to them until you know you have your core of produce, eggs, possibly meats, etc.
5. **So, start with a Vendor Interest Form.** Make a one-page document that announces your interest in hosting the market. Add lines where a prospective vendor can give you their contact info, what products they would bring, what days and times would work for them (if not predetermined), and how often they might be coming. Be clear that this is not an application – it’s a way to gauge interest and keep in contact. Distribute these far and wide: via farmer networks, feed stores, other farmers markets, various farm services offices, etc. Collect them until you have a critical mass of interest: usually about 15 vendors, or more depending on your goals.
6. **Meanwhile, develop an application.** A vendor application is a place to gather clear information about each vendor, but even more than that, it can and should serve as a contract. Use the application as a place to set expectations of vendors, limit your liability, and reinforce any producer-only standard you have. For a sample application, see www.asapconnections.org/citymarket.html
7. **Understand the regulatory environment.** There’s not a whole lot of regulation of markets, but do contact your local government to understand zoning, permitting, signage, or other business license rules that apply. There may be some cost. Within Asheville city limits it costs close to \$300 a year to permit a market. This is probably an extreme example in WNC. In many places, the cost will be zero. But do ask. In terms of the regulations your vendors face, it is best practice to have a signed agreement stating that they understand and comply with all applicable regulations relevant to their particular business. If you would like to better understand the regulatory environment for farms, see www.asapconnections.org/downloads/the-regulatory-environment-for-farms-in-western-north-carolina.pdf .
8. **Set the basics: fee, times, governance.**
Fee: Markets in WNC range in cost from \$20 a year to \$20 a week. With a higher fee, the market has more promotional power and possibly the resources to pay for the manager’s time. Some markets charge non-farms a different rate from farms. Some markets have a day vendor program in which a

fixed slate of every-week member vendors pay less, while day vendors have a “come when I tell you we have space” arrangement and pay more.

Times: Markets in WNC mostly range from 3 hours to 5 hours in duration. Vendors especially produce farmers, prefer shorter hours. Some customers prefer the convenience of longer hours.

Governance: Markets vary in terms of how the vendor voice is represented. Some are completely vendor-run, some have a vendor Board to advise the manager and represent fellow vendors, and others leave the vendors in more of a hands-off position. Define this and make it clear.

9. Create a marketing plan.

Tailgate markets need to go out and “recruit” customers, just like any other business. The market you start is probably not the only one around you. New markets need to think like entrepreneurs and define their own customer niche. Are you trying to reach a certain neighborhood? Age, income, or ethnic group? Is there a major workplace, school, or other facility that has a key customer base for you? Write a first-year plan and budget to get the word out. If you don’t have this skill, recruit somebody who does.

ASAP offers listing in our *Local Food Guide*, Appalachian Grown certification for markets, and matching funds programs to help you cover marketing costs.

10. Write the rules.

Market rules will usually go beyond the basics of fees, opening and closing times, and booth sizes. You’ll need to consider who can vend (what products and from how far away), what you mean by “producer only,” vendor notice for no-shows, insurance requirements if any, and more. You’ll also need to define what happens when rules are or appear to be violated. To see sample market rules & regulations from ASAP, again visit www.asapconnections.org/citymarket.html.

This advice is just the beginning. This document addresses starting a market. Running a market is a whole other matter. See ASAP’s document *Market Makeover: 25 Best Practices* at www.asapconnections.org/farmers_market_makeover.html.

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