



## TIPS FOR SELLING AT FOOD & FARMERS' MARKETS<sup>1</sup>

These suggestions for marketing at our farmers' markets were originally written in 2004 for farmers with no experience with direct marketing and have been adapted for Australian conditions by The Market Co. GC for our stallholders. Many of the examples below are about fruits and vegetables, but the same principles apply to everything you see at farmers' markets, including plants, flowers, bread, dog foods, etc. There are specific comments for meat, dairy and poultry producers. Lots of the following information could also be adapted and used for artisans and those selling fashion goods.

These ideas rely on the author's experience selling at farmers' markets in the Washington DC area since 1980. Her parents made a living selling vegetables at 14 farmers' markets each week. They are very good at marketing now, but they used to be hopeless. Farmers' markets were new in their area when they started and they had to figure out how to do everything. In retrospect, it's clear they weren't quick learners. It was years before they displayed their produce attractively. It was years before they wrote good signs – and laminated them so they weren't ruined by rain. It was years before they stopped growing, and trying to sell, things customer didn't want.

These ideas have proved to be very successful. Use what works for you!

### 1. Stock Quantities:

You must always make sure your market stall is brimming with produce. The public won't shop at a stall that doesn't display an abundance of fruits and vegetables and obviously has depleted stock. If you can't provide sufficient stock you probably shouldn't be selling at a Farmers' Market – a roadside stall might suit you better.

### 2. Signs – 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the article, *"Some thoughts on selling at farmers markets: Lessons in running a successful farmers market stand, from someone who's been in the business ... starting at age 9"*. Nina Planck, founder of the Regional Food Council in America.

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Good signage is invaluable. Go beyond the basics--include weight, cooking instructions and any other explanations that may be useful (or just plain fun).

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). A really effective sign could be something as simple as: **WE GROW REALLY GOOD BEANS.**

#### Suggestions for other handouts:

- Write a description of your farm (location, hectares, 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. If the 2 supermarket chains begin a fruits and vegetables price war, tell your customers why it's still better to buy their food from you.
- 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.

### 3. Charge what its worth. Is it superior, rare, organic??

Better food is worth more. When you have a superior product (better than the supermarket or 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 in 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.

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Offer discounts for volume. If you typically sell zucchini for \$5kg, or, when it's scarce, \$8kg. that's not cheap. But if you buy 3kg or more, it's \$5kg. You can also sell slightly more than 3kg in a basket for \$12. You can move a lot of zucchini that way to price-conscious shoppers who like zucchini but you can still get top price from the people who want just three zucchini.

#### 4. Value for money is always right

It's not a question of high or low prices. A good market and a good market stall has high-end quality products, 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.

Let us know when certain produce is coming into season plus any specials of the week and we'll publish this on Facebook and include them in our Sydney or Gold Coast Weekly Newsletters.

#### 5. Give samples & spruik

Walk out from behind your stall and approach your potential customers with samples. You'd be surprised how your sales increase in direct proportion to the number of patrons you approach. Start up a conversation and you'll probably start up a sale!

People love to try things. Teach them about your favourites. If you're tired of Golden Delicious apples and prefer Pink Lady, say so. Teach your customers how to use your produce, e.g. that Lebanese cucumbers are wonderful in salads. They have thinner skins and better flavour than standard cucumbers. Keep searching for new varieties. Purple carrots, Australian garlic and freshly made apple juice from locally grown apples are particularly popular at present.

Give away a new or exotic variety just to encourage customers to try unusual things.

#### 6. Suggest ideas, especially when the product is familiar or in surplus

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

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.

Here's another good sign: HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF A SURPLUS. You tell your customers how to preserve things easily and on short notice. For example, when we come home with more fresh herbs than we know we can use in three days, we 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.

#### 7. Eat your own food, wear your own fashion pieces

Nothing is more discouraging 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 your produce or gourmet foods, use your creams or soaps, wear your latest fashion items.

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Restaurants have wine and food tastings for staff so they can answer diners' questions fully and, yes, subjectively. You should give the same type of training to anyone who works with you.

## 8. Give customers personal opinions

You must be able to answer 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 favourites, 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 flavour") and stick to objective descriptions ("good for baking"). The customer will thank you for it.

## 9. Tell them how to store 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:

<p><b>"How to Keep Your Cut Lettuce Fresh:</b> If dry will keep in its bag in the fridge for a week. If wet, remove from plastic bag, wash and spin dry then keep in an airtight container in the fridge for a week</p>
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## 10. Quality is everything

Ultimately, farmers' markets will not succeed simply because you are a farmer, a gourmet food producer or an artisan and other people 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 mouldy, your corn is immature or old and dry, your beans are tough, your meat is poorly packaged, your gourmet foods are bland, your wine is inferior, your bread is stale, your lettuce is wilted, your tomatoes are tasteless, your soaps and body creams are unappealing and your fashion is repetitive or only appealing to the very young or very old, customers won't come back. Test your products. Do they measure up?

One of your earliest lessons should be the dual importance of a high quality product and a high quality relationship with your regular customers.

In a customer survey taken recently, 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 farmers' markets.

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 or a small business person. They will go back to the supermarkets.

## 11. Choose good varieties and breeds

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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, organic honey, free range organic eggs, high quality wine, marbled, well-hung beef.

If you grow a good variety of something or raise a good breed with some noticeable downside (some strawberries are quite small, or very large, not all cuts of meat are available), don't hide it. Explain it.

For processed foods, use only the best ingredients and tell customers why your jam or cheese or bread is different—it's hand-made, cured properly, or not treated with chemicals. Only cook with free range, preferably organic, eggs and never use commercial pre-prepared cake mixes.

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

If your product has any good quality—Roma tomatoes makes thick sauce, a breed of beef is good on the grill because it's marbled, some peaches are easier to peel—say so.

## 12. Have something to sell all year round

This is especially critical for fruit and vegetable farmers. It's not worth coming to market only to sell asparagus, strawberries or cherries for a few 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.

## 13. 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, flavours of juice, cuts of meat. Customers will stay longer and spend more.



*Presentation can be a gradual lesson. You can start off by simply opening the doors of your van and spread your wares out on the pavement. (Arlington Farmers Market, circa 1983)*

## 14. Bags

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

### 15. Work with The Market Co. GC

If you have a problem or suggestion, tell us. Are the market hours right? Do you have requests from customers for something no producer is supplying? Tell us about your farm. YLM represents you to the public through advertising, marketing and talking to market patrons during a market.

### 16. Cultivate regular, loyal customers

You must aim to build a base of customers who shop regularly at farmers' markets. You don't want 10,000 one-time-only purchases from the occasional passer-by. You want 100 people to shop 100 times at farmers' markets. Or 1,000 people to make 10 purchases. You want people to come to market to spend \$30 - \$100, not \$10. 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 the regularity of our market. Encourage them to bring friends, colleagues, family, and neighbours to the market.

### 17. Pile them high and fill it up

You must restock constantly. Consider carefully who takes money and who restocks at a 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 carton left, find a smaller basket. By the end of market you might have one fennel bulb in a small basket, a few capsicums in a small box, zucchini in a small basket. Customers dislike buying the last of anything—it looks like the dregs. The smaller container looks like abundance.

### 18. 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. 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 you would do if each stall was 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 is worth.

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You will always face new competition. If another stallholder is out-selling, under-pricing, or out-producing you, these are things you can do:

- **You can compete on price** - *This has limited usefulness and in the long run doesn't work.* Many of you know markets that collapsed under competitive price-cutting. The farmers' market has to work for all the stallholders. Customers will not come to a market with only one stallholder 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 does not mean that each customer buys more. It leaves every stallholder with lower sales. It does not attract or maintain regular customers. 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: You could grow smaller melons if you are 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 mini Cos 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 neighbour is growing. Specialize and diversify.
- **You can promote yourself better** - 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 of a farmers' market should be to serve 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 market numbers increase. The Market Co. GC will be working towards this goal in Sydney and on the Gold Coast.

Stability doesn't mean that in five years you will be growing, producing or cooking the same items as today, or that customers will still buy them. You will grow, cook or produce new things, try new sales techniques, get more customers, and learn things from new producers. (Yes - there will be new stallholders attending our markets!)

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 we are all patient.

## 19. 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 colourful 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 all our 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, some small producers still 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.

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If this is the only way you can market your fresh or frozen produce, create a U-shaped stand to invite customers in without making a commitment, so browsing is possible. Invite customers to rummage through the plastic bins for frozen meat, so self-selection is possible. You might consider a nice colour photo of each cut on the chest.

## 20. Bring photos

Bring not only your food, but also your farm or place of business to market. Pictures of crops, animals, processing (say, making cheese, sausages, muffins, pasta), 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.

## 21. Be cheerful and active

A bored, sullen person behind the counter is fatal. Sitting in a low chair (only stools are permitted at our markets), crossing arms, reading books, papers or magazines, texting, wearing earphones, working on a laptop and not making eye contact with the public will never achieve a sale. 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 rubbish, 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, loud rock music, and the impression "I just work here."

Many farmers' markets also start early in the morning and in winter, can be cold places. Avoid standing around looking cold & sullen with your arms crossed. Get some thermal underwear, gloves etc so that you're not cold. Unhappy stallholders give off negative vibes, so get warm!

## 22. Perfect your marketing equipment

Growing vegetables, raising animals, producing quality gourmet foods and making skin creams, soaps and fashion items is only half the battle. Do not neglect the infra-structure of marketing. Have a good sign box with magic markers, blank paper, tape. Organize signs by product in a small plastic recipe box. The ONIONS file, for example, should contain all the onion signs with various prices and quantities.

When you get to market you can quickly choose the sign you need.

Your market report tells how much you sold, at what price and when an item sold out. When you're loading for next week's market, you have a good idea of what the market can sell. You should refer to the market reports year after year.

Bring enough change to get you through the early \$50 and \$100 notes. Experiment with tarpaulins until you find the right one. Bring wet towels or water spray bottles to keep lettuce, seedlings, cut flowers and potted plants from wilting or sagging in the heat. Use white side tarps to keep everything shady. Ensure your cakes, tarts, slices, cheeses, olives (if not packaged) are displayed in Perspex stands in accordance with current health regulations. Make sure every market has the baskets, boards and tables it needs. (use a check list). Marketing equipment should be modular so it works at every market. Usually it has two purposes: it's part of the load itself and it becomes part of the display.

## 23. Run the numbers and use these examples

Like most small business owners, farmers seldom discuss how much they make. The Market Co. GC has always believed that the success of farmers' markets depends on the success of farm businesses. We hope that by sharing information we can encourage more farmers to sell at farmers' markets.

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**SPECIALIZE:** Some growers grow 25 varieties of tomatoes.

**GROW THE BEST VARIETIES:** If it isn't delicious, don't grow it.

**GIVE SAMPLES:** Regular customers will ask for tomatoes by name.

**TREAT IT PROPERLY;** Tomatoes should be ripe and unbruised.

**CHARGE WHAT IT'S WORTH:** You're not too fancy, but customers think your tomatoes are worth \$9.00 a kilo. Some of your prices are higher than the supermarket or the stand next door, some lower. Between you, the competition, and the customer, you learn what your product is worth.

**GROW WHAT THE CUSTOMER WANTS** – Instead of selling whole basil plants, with the muddy root and all the stems still on, for \$1, cut just the leaves, wash and bunch them and make ten times more money per plant.

**GROW HIGH-VALUE CROPS** on small pieces of ground. Basil is light and small to carry to market.

**PRODUCE GOODS SUPERMARKETS DON'T SELL WELL OR JUST DON'T SELL** - 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 long and it's bland.

The author's parents paid substantial fees to attend farmers' markets and they were glad to do it. With 14 farmers' markets, including some weekday markets, they were 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 was labour, about \$110,000.

By using our marketing tips it is possible to sell only at farmers' markets and have no other income. Farmers' markets can save your farm or your business. That is why you must work hard, not only to sell more of your products, but also to convince customers and communities that farmers, gourmet food producers and artisans 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 and gourmet food producers, small and large in size and sales, rely on farmers' markets too.



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