

10

Value and Quality

This chapter will enable you to:

- ▶ Be aware of the manager's role in quality assurance.
- ▶ Provide resources for establishing a quality assurance program for your market.

Customers shop for value. Good value equates to the right mix of convenience, quality, and price. While price and quality decisions are ultimately up to each vendor, farmers market management should strive to ensure that customers are finding good value from week to week and season to season. This chapter addresses issues of quality assurance while the next is devoted to pricing.

Each Vendor's Attention to Quality Affects the Market as a Whole

Meeting everyone's expectations all of the time is seldom possible, but some issues, such as food safety and fair pricing practices, demand consistent attention and high standards without compromise. One vendor's careless or ignorant disregard for proper food-safety practices can result in illness and

put a market's reputation at risk, hurting everyone involved and possibly resulting in damaging legal action. Likewise, a single vendor who leaves customers feeling cheated can compromise customer loyalty, adversely affecting everyone's sales and the fun atmosphere in which markets thrive.

Fortunately, there are a few simple steps to follow and numerous resources available to help ensure that the market consistently provides the highest value possible to the major-



ity of its customers. To achieve this goal, a market should establish quality standards and develop a program to monitor and evaluate its vendors' products and services. The program should contain

- Set Benchmarks
- Monitor and Evaluate
- Communicate and Educate

measures to educate vendors about maintaining and improving quality, as well as how to set fair market prices that meet their need for financial sustainability.

Establishing a Quality Assurance Protocol

Research shows that an overwhelming majority of customers expect to find high quality and freshness at farmers markets. Meeting this expectation requires an understanding of customer preferences. Consumers of farmers market products perceive quality in many ways that depend on the type of product, how it is to be prepared, when it will be consumed, and who will be consuming it. In addition to properties such as freshness, flavor, and cosmetic appeal, quality concerns address issues such as food safety, production methods, and place of origin.

Some basic measures of produce quality for common products at a farmers market include:

All products

- ▣ Freshness – when harvested/prepared, postharvest handling and storage practices, etc.
- ▣ Production practices – organic, free-range, grass-fed, etc.
- ▣ Place of origin – local versus regional or out of state, label examples, etc.

Fruits and Vegetables

- ▣ Flavor – sweet, rich, bitter, bland, etc.
- ▣ Texture – crisp, juicy, soft, mealy, etc.
- ▣ Appearance – color, shape, blemishes, cleanliness, etc.
- ▣ Size.
- ▣ Degree of maturity – green, ripe or mature, overly ripe.

Is it Halaal? Kosher? USDA Choice? Does it come with an Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée, guaranteeing its quality? Quality assurance efforts are as old as commerce itself.



Meats and Fish

- Flavor.
- Amount of fat.
- Cut – filet, boneless, etc.
- Fresh or frozen.

Eggs

- Size and color.

Dairy

- Flavor, texture, and fat content.



Baked Goods

- Flavor, texture, and nutritional value.

Preserves, Jams, and Jellies

- Flavor.
- Color.
- Texture.
- Percent fruit content.
- Amount and type of sweetener.

Every market should take an active role in quality assurance, working above and with each vendor's individual efforts. A team effort with feedback from growers, customers, and other agencies and organizations will help to establish and even exceed benchmarks for quality. Communication and education also will aid vendors in improving overall quality and in fine-tuning their products to meet customer preferences. Remember that merchandising and display also affect customer perceptions of quality.

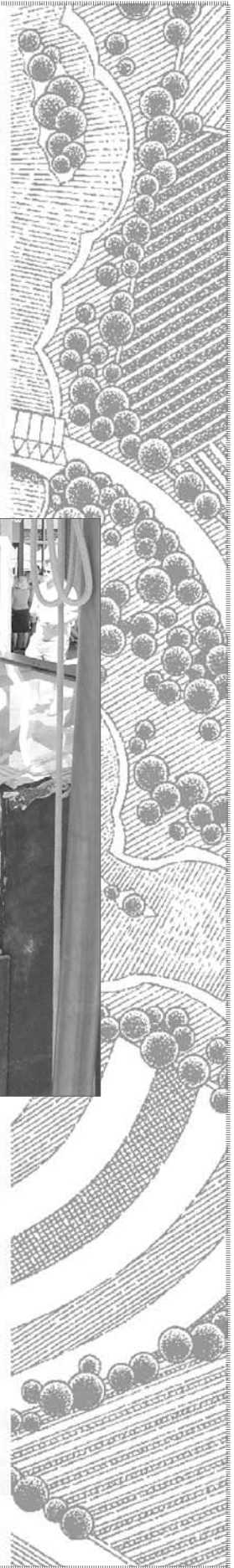
Putting a Quality Assurance Process in Place: Six Steps toward Ensuring Quality at a Farmers Market

- Create a market quality assurance board or committee with growers, customers, restaurateurs, nutritionists, and Cooperative Extension specialists. A diverse board or committee is more likely to represent all stakeholders' interests. Learn about and include your customers' demographic perspectives on quality. Your quality board should work proactively with other agencies that

Growing Your Farmers Market

deal with quality issues rather than waiting for problems to surface. See the following section for some examples of such agencies. Creation of a quality assurance board or committee, its relationship to the manager and board of directors, and its role in the market should be considered at the outset. Will the body be advisory only or will it have certain powers? For example, if members of a quality assurance board make recommendations that are rejected by the manager or board of directors and there are no clearly established roles and responsibilities, hard feelings may result. In such a case, the overall effect could be detrimental to the market as an organization and a quality assurance board begun with the best of intentions may have a negative impact on the market. Think through your decisions and processes for assuring high quality at the market.

- Learn what customers want through surveys, tastings, and quality-judging events. Blind taste tests can include nonlocal produce from outlets such as supermarkets.
- Write a policy that defines a set of quality characteristics in simple terms so that everyone understands what the benchmarks are.
- Sample produce yourself and talk with vendors. Learn about their production practices, seasonal effects, and other factors that influence quality. Feedback helps everyone focus on improving quality.
- Assist and support vendors with their quality-control efforts. One of the biggest challenges to quality at outdoor markets is keeping fresh produce cool throughout the day. Every effort should be made to provide shade, especially for vendors with heat-sensitive products like greens and lettuce mixes. Assign stall spaces accordingly, placing vendors of such products in areas with maximum shade, such as beneath a tree or on the north-facing side of the street. Keep a few extra spray bottles handy to lend to vendors and make sure water is available.
- Inform customers of your efforts. For example, publish taste-test results in your newsletter. Watch and listen for customer input on quality at the market and in written suggestions, comments, and letters. Help the public and press

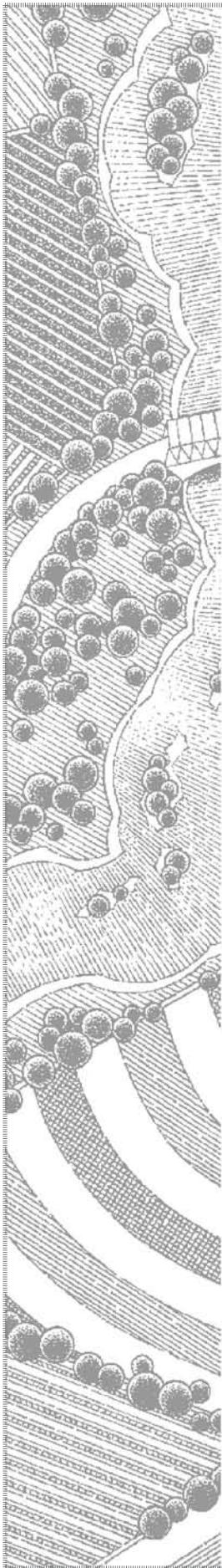


understand market quality in press releases and through education at the market. Sponsor a local chef, nutritionist, or master gardener to train customers on how to choose quality produce and how to store produce at home to prolong shelf life and protect quality and nutritional value.

Handling Complaints

From time to time, a customer may express dissatisfaction with a vendor's product or service. The following suggestions are offered in addition to help specifically with quality-related issues:

- First, determine whether or not the customer has brought the complaint to the attention of the vendor in question. While it may be appropriate for the market manager to assist with mediation, most quality issues should be resolved directly between the customer and the vendor. Such complaints typically can be handled by a simple refund or exchange.
- Keep a written record of all complaints. This will be useful in identifying problem vendors and problem customers. Make sure all volunteers and staff members at the market are informed of the complaint policy and notify management immediately of any problems.
- When possible, discuss complaints with a vendor after the market rather than during busy periods or when other customers are present.
- If a complaint is serious (related to food safety, for example) or a vendor has generated numerous complaints, bring this to the attention of the board. You may then choose to issue a written notice to the vendor. Request that the vendor provide you with a written response detailing how he or she plans to resolve the issue.
- If a vendor refuses or is unable to resolve the matter after repeated notices, it may be necessary to consider more serious action. Make sure your bylaws cover such action, whatever it may be.
- Be aware of potentially serious complaints such as those that relate to food safety and fraud. Do not hesitate to contact appropriate authorities immediately on such matters. Delaying only increases the risks to customers as well as the liability of the manager, the vendor, and the market as a whole. Some municipalities require all merchants, including vendors at farmers markets, to carry product liability insurance. It might be worth researching this option as a risk management strategy and for peace of mind.



External Resources for Quality Assurance

A number of organizations and agencies deal with product and service quality. Some cities have even begun to establish food policies that impact the sale of food products to city agencies and at city-sponsored events, including farmers markets. Be informed and develop a rapport with the people with whom you will be dealing on quality issues. Help vendors stay informed as well. Many of them may be selling in different cities and counties and regulations that govern food quality and safety often vary from place to place. Here is a list of organization and agencies you might contact:

City Government

- ▣ Local health codes
- ▣ Product liability requirements
- ▣ Food policies
- ▣ Consumer assurance agencies (see an example on the following page).
- ▣ Small business associations (to help vendors with pricing and profit/loss)

County

- ▣ Health department
- ▣ Agricultural commissioner
- ▣ Cooperative Extension (information for vendors on postharvest handling, food safety, and profit/loss studies)
- ▣ County marketing programs

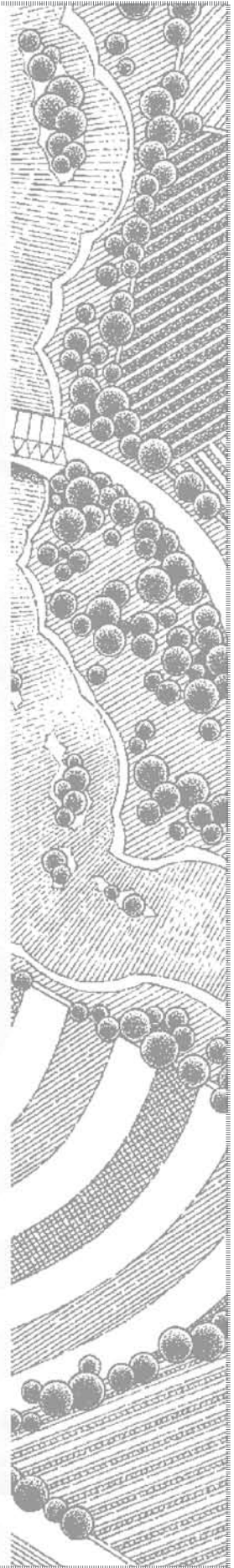
State

- ▣ Department of agriculture
- ▣ Marketing programs, including labels such as “Go Texan!” and “California Grown,” for example.
- ▣ Organic certification programs
- ▣ Consumer protection agencies
- ▣ State quality regulations for agricultural products

Federal

- ▣ The U.S. Department of Agriculture Agricultural Marketing Service (USDA-AMS)

The Agricultural Marketing Service administers programs that facilitate efficient, fair marketing of U.S. agricultural products, including food, fiber, and specialty crops. Some USDA-AMS programs, such as the one for live-stock, mandate inspection for quality control; others offer guidelines for



quality standards. Visit the agency's website at www.ams.usda.gov. For quality standards, visit www.ams.usda.gov/standards.

■ The National Organic Program

USDA-AMS also administers the new National Organic Program. This program affects the production, processing, and marketing of all agricultural products labeled "organic" in the U.S. For more information, visit the program website at www.ams.usda.gov/nop or contact:

Richard Mathews, Program Manager Telephone: 202.720.3252
 USDA-AMS-TMP-NOP Fax: 202.205.7808
 Room 4008-South Building email: NOPWebmaster@usda.gov
 1400 and Independence Avenue, SW
 Washington, DC 20250-0020

Other Organizations

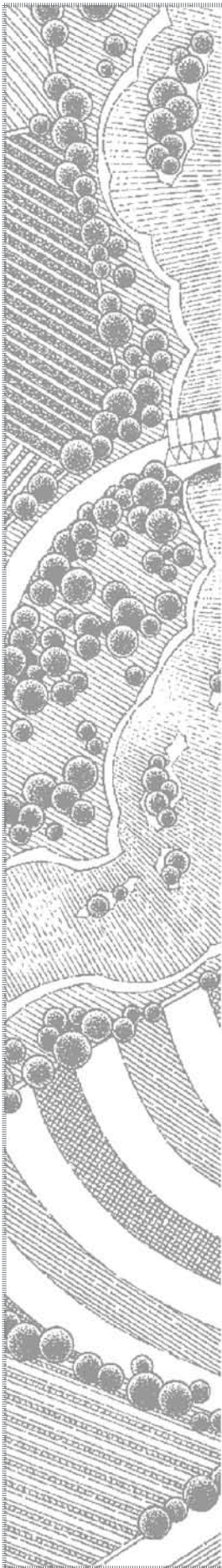
Markets in Your Area – A good place to start with quality and pricing questions is with other markets in your area. Visit them periodically and consult with other managers. Supermarkets, particularly those known for quality, are also worth visiting.

Local Food Critics – Most daily and weekly newspapers run a food section and have food editors and critics on staff. Consider contacting them regarding quality and information about what customers prefer.

Qualifying Organizations – There are many organizations that rate or certify food product quality. Some to consider are: Demeter (certifies "biodynamic" produce), Kosher (there about 300 Kosher certification organizations in the U.S.), Labor (United Farm Workers and other labels). Make sure vendors use proper signs and postings.

Example: San Francisco Department of Consumer Assurance from www.ci.sf.ca.us/casf/index.htm

San Francisco County currently has several certified farmers markets where growers can sell produce directly to consumers. The San Francisco Department of Consumer Assurance certifies each market annually and performs periodic inspections to ensure compliance with state direct-marketing regulations. The department also issues producer's certificates to growers, which verify that they are the producers of the agriculture commodities sold at the markets. The department oversees San Francisco's Alemany farmers market.



Conclusion

This chapter has introduced strategies your market can employ to improve and ensure the quality of products offered at the market. The next will address issues of pricing.

