

Collecting and Interpreting Data: Research Tools and Methods for Market Performance Assessment

This chapter will enable you to:

- ▶ Be familiar with a variety of data collection methods and their uses.
- ▶ Begin choosing the data collection methods to use in assessing your market's performance.

To grow your market, you need to assess its current performance, strengths, and weaknesses. Assessment involves research—collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data. There are a number of research methods and tools that can be used to collect data on the performance of your farmers market.

An Overview of Data Collection Methods

There are a number of different methods of collecting the data you need to assess your market's performance, evaluate your strengths and weaknesses and position relative

to your competitors, and create a strategic marketing plan. This section provides a brief overview of those data collection methods and their appropriate use.

Anecdotal Data

Anecdotes are stories. Anecdotal data simply means the information you get from the stories you hear about the market from day to day—vendors' stories about outrageous complaints or happy customers, customers' stories about their favorite market experience when you run into them at the library or a meeting, stories you tell your family at the dinner table. Anecdotal data is a good starting point for more formal research. From interacting with customers, the manager, staff, and vendors probably have a fairly good idea of basic issues and questions to be asked. The manager should also have a picture of the issues that concern the market's vendors and possibly of issues regarding the market that may concern area business owners and neighbors. Such data, while not gathered or interpreted systematically, can point to the questions that should be the focus of more formal efforts to evaluate market performance.



Customer and Vendor Feedback

If the market has a suggestion box or a process for handling written complaints, the records of these also can be useful for evaluating themes and trends in the strengths and weaknesses of the market. Such themes and trends can be a basis for more formal research and analysis.

Surveys

Surveys are probably the most common method of formal research. Surveys are usually written documents, though they may be administered verbally. Surveys ask a common set of questions of everyone who responds, typically offering multiple choice answers or rating scales and sometimes allowing respondents to add information or comments.

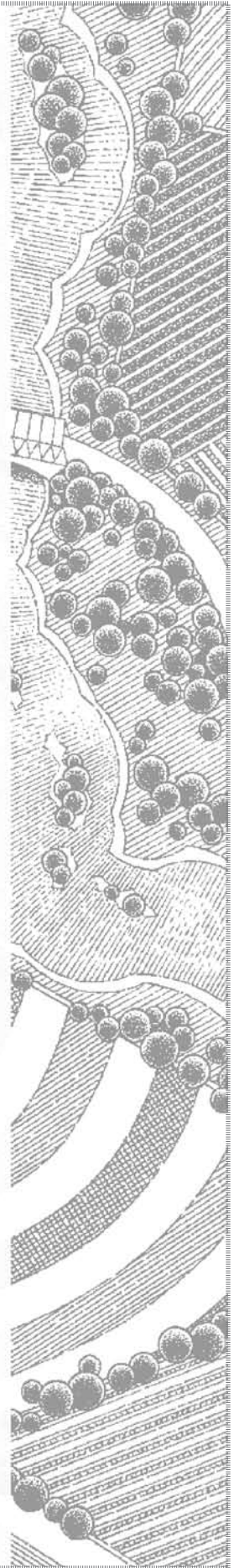
A major advantage of surveys is that they standardize the collection of information so that it is uniform and interpretation can be relatively straightforward. Another advantage is that administration by mail, the internet, or on paper at the market itself is often less labor intensive than any other method of collecting information.

Some disadvantages of surveys are that the success of the survey depends in large part on the focus of the questions and the quality of the survey's design. For example, a survey may ask respondents to rate their satisfaction with the market's schedule. If respondents indicate they are not satisfied with the schedule and there is no survey question about what they find unsatisfactory or about what schedule would be more satisfactory, the survey's information is not very helpful.

Some common pitfalls in designing surveys are to make them too short to be fully informative, too long for respondents to finish, too general to elicit information that is useful in improving the market, or too specific to allow respondents to give feedback about concerns that are important to them but not represented in the survey. Finding a balance between too short and too long and too general and too specific can be very difficult! It helps to have a clear idea of what you want to learn from a survey and who you want to respond.

Interviews

Interviews can be valuable sources of in-depth information about the preferences and evaluations of respondents. Interviews can range from the very formal, following a strict protocol with the same questions asked of every respondent, to very informal, with the interviewer following the respondent's comments and allowing information to emerge based on those comments. Most interviews will fall some-



where in the middle with a common set of questions and leeway to follow up on interesting comments.

The primary advantage of the interview as a data collection tool is the chance to get more in-depth information than is possible in a survey. However, interviews also have a number of disadvantages. First, they are far more labor intensive to conduct and interpret than surveys. Someone must ask the interview questions of each individual respondent and either tape record or take detailed notes of the answers. The personality of the interviewer can have a huge effect on the quality and completeness of responses. If interviews are recorded, they must be played back, transcribed, or both. Because responses will probably contain a great deal of variation among respondents, it can be difficult and time-consuming to find the themes that are useful for improving the market. All these considerations mean that interviews are only practical with a small number of respondents, unlike the much larger number that can be reached with a survey. The two in combination can improve on the results of either interviews or surveys alone, and we discuss how to combine methods for maximum effectiveness in the chapter on evaluating your market.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are interviews in which the researchers bring together a group of people who do not necessarily know each other but who share a characteristic that is relevant to the question to be answered. If, for example, you wish to learn why some people in the target population do not shop at your farmers market, you might assemble a focus group of people who have shopped at the market in the past but do not do so now, or a group of people in your target population who have never shopped at the market.

An advantage to focus group interviews is that they allow people to build on each others' ideas, reflecting and listening and developing their opinions through interaction. Such interviews can yield richer, more thoughtful answers than individual interviews.

Disadvantages of focus groups are that they are difficult to organize and that they require some skill on the part of the interviewer to keep the group on track. Furthermore, because the answers are the result of interaction, they may vary highly from group to group and so can be difficult to interpret. A group can easily be "hijacked" by the strong opinions of a single individual. Trustworthy results depend on conducting several focus group interviews and looking for common themes in the responses.



Tasting Panels

Related to a focus group, a tasting panel is a group of people gathered to evaluate market products. You can use tasting panels to assess your product mix and quality.

Observation

Another useful source of data is observation with specific criteria or questions in mind. Market management might gather data by observing and recording the level of activity at the market at different hours—is the market busy early in the day with business tapering off later or is it steady? Do vendors tend to have large amounts of product left or run out early? Observation, especially when combined with other sources of data, can be very useful in evaluating the market's performance.

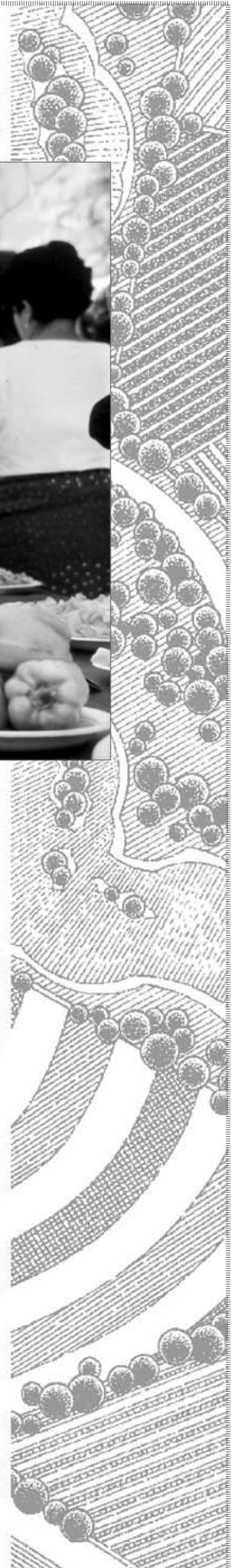
One method of observation involves counting—numbers of customers per half hour or the number of customers who fit certain categories, such as families with young children or seniors, for example.

Observation/Comparison

Especially when evaluating your position relative to competitors such as supermarkets, you can use observations and comparisons; for example, you may compare price, quality, or selection of a sample of produce.

Document Analysis

A functioning market already has invaluable sources of data in the records kept. Much can be learned from records of vendor sales or percentages of revenue paid as fees to the market and other financial records. Such records give a picture of the market's busy and less busy times and seasons.





Census Data

You can gain useful information about customer and community demographics from census data; especially when compared with a profile of the market's customers obtained from observations, counts, and/or surveys, the market's management can evaluate how well the market is attracting and serving its target customers and how representative the market's customers are of the community as a whole.

Map

A simple way to profile the market's customers is to post a map of the community and ask customers to mark their neighborhood or street with a pushpin or a written "x." This method can also be used to get a quick and graphic picture of customer satisfaction with many factors of market performance, including quality, variety, and pricing.

Conclusion

The most important consideration for collecting high-quality data and interpreting it accurately is knowing what questions you want to answer with the information you gather. Once you have identified those questions, you can choose the most appropriate methods for gathering and interpreting information to answer them. With a focused effort, you will likely find the information you need to create a successful strategic marketing effort.

