

Building Positive Customer Relations

This chapter will enable you to:

- ▶ Be familiar with ways to maintain positive customer relations.
- ▶ Be aware of strategies for retaining current customers.

While customers appreciate freshness and quality in the produce they buy at a farmers market, it literally goes without saying that they expect a positive experience and good relations with vendors and with any staff members with whom they have contact. The presence of good customer relations practices may never be noted, but its absence will surely be noticed and will affect customer loyalty.

Methods for Positive Customer Relations and Customer Retention

Positive relations depend on customers perceiving vendors, the market manager, and any other market staff and volunteers as respectful, fair, and friendly. Skills and training in customer service are invaluable in this respect. There are also a few ways to build customer service into the market's basic business practices.

Include procedures for dealing with complaints and disputes in the market rules. It is easier to resolve disputes between a customer and a grower or the market when market policies are already established, clearly written, and approved and understood by growers and the board of directors.

Reserve at least one seat on the board of directors for a consumer or community representative. While the market's mission may be to improve farmers' economic viability or to promote organic agriculture—in other words, customer service is not an explicit part of the market's mission—no market can thrive if it does not serve its customers and meet their needs. Including customer representation on the board contributes to the market's ability to succeed by meeting customers' needs and preferences.

Offer forums for customer feedback such as a suggestion box, comment cards, surveys, and focus groups. Besides maintaining and improving customer relations, these venues also provide data about customer preferences that you can use to improve products and services.

Methods of Retaining Current Customers

In addition to positive customer relations, there are other ways to maintain customer loyalty. They include consistency, quality, and easy access to the market and its goods and services, as well as special services and promotions.

Offer assistance to customers. Consider having volunteers on hand to help carry groceries or heavy items (e.g., watermelons) to the car for elderly and disabled customers and those who have too much to carry alone. Have baskets or even wagons available so customers can manage their many purchases while at the market. If parking is far away, establish a loading zone close to the market and have volunteers hold groceries with a claim check while customers pick up their vehicles.

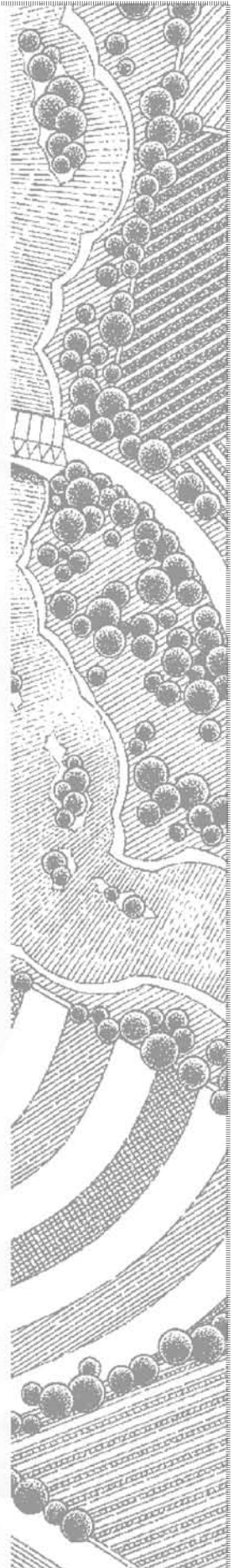
Transportation to the market. Organize shuttles for senior citizens and customers from outlying neighborhoods. Provide schedules for public transportation (buses, subways, light rail) with stops close to the market.

Consistent organization of vendors. Locate vendors in the same spot from week to week so customers always know where to find their favorite products and vendors. If the market is sizeable, make a map of the vendors' stalls that also includes each vendor's name and contact information to encourage special orders and sales outside of the market.

Frequent shopper cards and rewards. Vendors can punch cards or otherwise note amounts of purchases. For every \$50 or \$100 spent, a customer could earn a reward such as a market tote bag or t-shirt or \$5 off the next purchase.

Promotions. Raffles, tastings, music, and children's events all keep customers coming back to the market. See Chapter Eight for more on promotions.

Newsletter. If you have the capacity, consider starting an email or mailing list and keeping core customers up to date on market news, what is in



season, and special events through a brief monthly newsletter. Invite customers to subscribe to the newsletter and give them a way to unsubscribe to an email list. Also, be sure never to give away or sell your email or mailing list without customers' permission.

Conclusion

Basic friendliness, respect, and courtesy are the most important aspects of positive customer relations, so if there is any question that guidelines or training may be needed, those things should be a priority. Other strategies may require more staff time and energy than the market has available; if that is the case, then do not attempt to implement them. It is better to do the basics well than to attempt more energy-intensive strategies and implement them poorly. As the market grows and develops greater capacity, you may choose to implement additional customer relations strategies.

