

6

Maintaining Positive Relations with Vendors

This chapter will enable you to:

- ▶ **Be aware of the role of the manager and the market in the success of vendors.**
- ▶ **Be aware of actions you can take to maintain and strengthen positive relationships with vendors.**

Developing and maintaining good relations with your vendors is essential to the stability of the market. Satisfied vendors are likely to be loyal, remaining with the market or returning season after season, creating consistency of product for the market. Vendors develop relationships with customers, who come back week after week to buy specific items from their favorite farmers. Vendors also are more likely to get involved in the market on a larger level and take part in the decision-making process. Conversely, dissatisfied vendors undermine a market's stability and success. Vendors who feel like they are being treated unfairly or that the manager is not doing enough to help their business at the market may leave and the entire market will suffer. Even if they do not leave, they may complain among themselves and hurt morale. This chapter addresses the key points in managing relations with vendors.

The Role of the Manager and the Market in the Success of Vendors

Your responsibility to the vendors is to create a business environment in which they can successfully market their products. All of the work you do in public relations, accounting, and keeping track of regulations is ultimately focused on developing and maintaining that place where vendors bring their goods and make a living selling them. How you communicate with the vendors, how you apply the rules, how you handle conflict, and the tone you set for the market are critical to the overall health of the market.



Farmers Market Management Skills

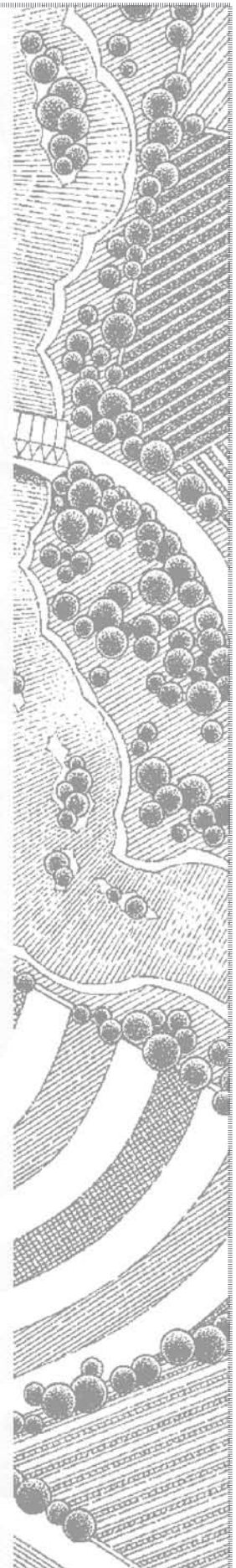
The relationship between the market manager and vendor can be a complicated one. The manager may be charged with the task of telling vendors what they can and cannot do. The manager may decide who gets a particular space at the market, which produce a vendor can sell, and even who is allowed into the market as a vendor. The manager may also enforce rules and regulations that have been established by a wide variety of agencies and organizations, including the farmers market itself. At the same time, the manager has a good deal of potential to help vendors with their business at the market by promoting their products, analyzing sales trends and providing feedback, and developing the market as a whole.

The stability of the market is crucial to a farmer who has, to some degree, planned production around the sales expected at the market. The farmer can easily be put in a vulnerable position if the market is managed poorly and the number of customers declines, if competition between vendors selling similar products is too intense, if a stall space is taken away, or if the rules and regulations of the market are unfair or poorly designed. To complicate matters, some farmers markets have a high turnover rate among managers, creating discontinuity and a breakdown in communication between vendors and the manager. These situations have the potential to impact the vendors' ability to market their products and earn their livelihoods.

The manager's responsibility to the vendors, then, is to make it possible for them to do business successfully.

Strategies and Actions to Maintain and Strengthen Relations with Vendors

There are a number of concrete steps you can take to build positive relationships with the vendors at your market. Discussed in detail in the following pages, those steps include knowing your farmers, maintaining open communication, and setting the right tone for the market.



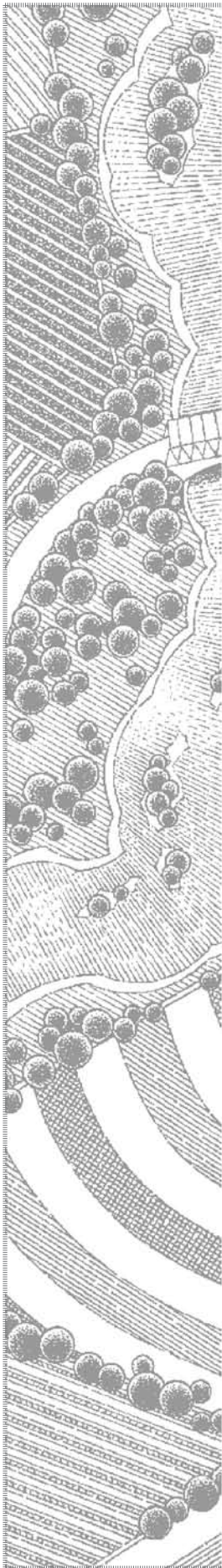
Know Your Farmers

Being a farmer is different from many other types of jobs. Farming is a lifestyle as much as a job, one that involves working long hours of the day and night every day. Often several members of the family as well as several employees are involved in making the farm run. The goods that they bring to the market represent much more than a product that was manufactured somewhere or purchased wholesale from a distributor. They are the result of a great deal of the hard work on which their livelihoods rely. It is important to get to know the farmers at your market so you can develop a good working relationship with them. Visit their farms if you can; find out something about their lives. At the very least, know what crops they grow, what methods of farming they use, and how many acres they farm. Spend an afternoon selling produce with a farmer at the market. Learn what his or her day is like from that side of the table.

Knowing about your vendors and what they supply will help you plan for your market and identify gaps in products for which you will have to find additional vendors. It will also help you to promote particular items (promotion is discussed in detail in the third volume in the series, *Growing Your Farmers Market*).

The Southland Farmers Market Association in Los Angeles recommends asking new farmers the following questions to gain an understanding of their business.

- Crops – What kinds of crops and other products do you raise?
- Seasons – Exactly when do specific crops mature in your area?
- Experience – Have you thought of growing any other crops for increased variety?
- Marketing – How do you usually move your crop? Do you have a stand as well?
- Volume – How much acreage do you have in production?
- Familiarity – Have you talked to other farmers in the area who sell at these markets?
- Practicality – Are there other markets in the county at which you would like to sell?
- Testing – What volume would you need to sell to interest you in selling at this market?



Farmers Market Management Skills

Farmers who are new to selling at farmers markets may need some assistance initially to help them develop the best way to display and promote their products. Supporting new vendors does more than help them learn the ropes and generate adequate income from their sales. Vendors' success is also an asset to the market as a whole. Support for new vendors can include tips on displaying products, customer relations, signage, market rules and regulations, and how to offer samples for customers. Some markets offer reduced stall fees for new vendors to take some of the pressure off during their first market season. Personal communication between the manager and the vendor is also important to help vendors understand the rules and overall "climate" of the market.

Know Farming in Your Area

In addition to knowing your individual farmers, you should know about agriculture as well. If you are not already familiar with farming, you should make every effort to learn enough about agriculture to understand the issues your vendors face. This includes the seasons in which their crops are available, the produce's desired level of quality, and external problems such as weather that affect the produce grown for your market.

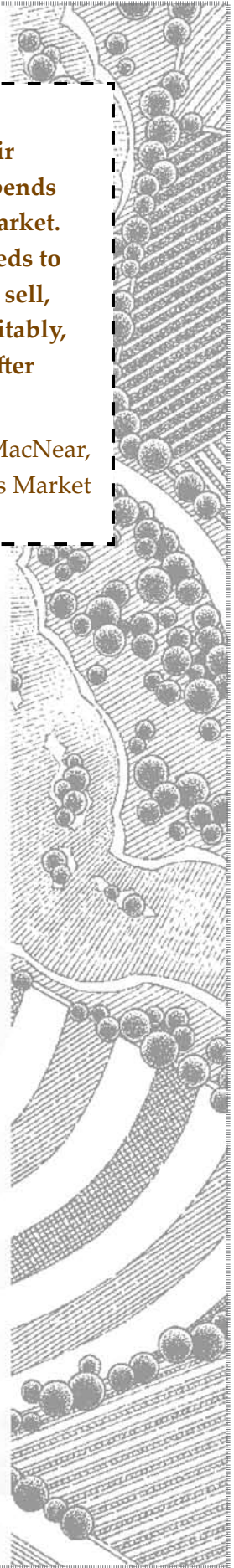
This information can help you in many ways. Most importantly, it helps you communicate more easily with your farmers. If you do not understand the impact of a freeze on a citrus crop or a drought on corn, you will have a hard time dealing with the inevitable agricultural disasters and their effects on your market.

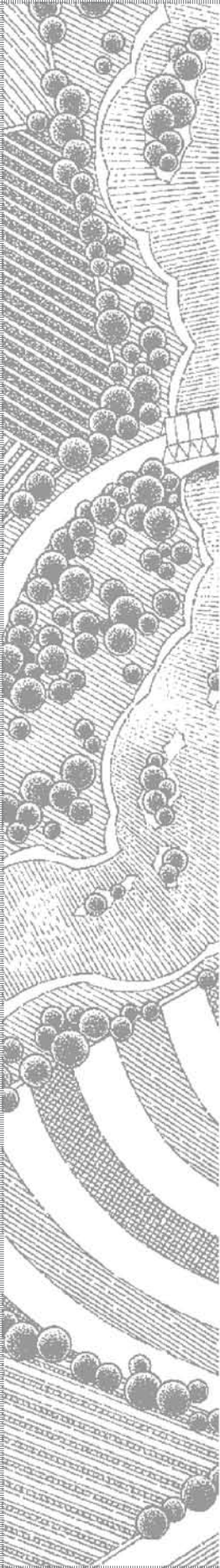
Maintain Open Communication

Developing good relationships with your vendors is an ongoing process. As in any relationship, you cannot ignore a relationship and hope that it continues to go well. Simple gestures can go a long way toward making vendors feel valued at the market. John Silveira and Vince Scalise of the Pacific Coast Farmers Market

Many farmers are very vulnerable to market management and are very distrustful since their livelihood—where they move their crops—depends on whether a manager will let them into the market. There are certain basics that a market seller needs to feel secure—knowing that they have a place to sell, that they are going to be treated fairly and equitably, that they have their space to go back to week after week.

—Randii MacNear,
Manager of the Davis, California Farmers Market





Association suggest greeting vendors when they arrive at the market in the morning; many will have already put in several hours of work and driving time, and they may arrive feeling anxious or stressed. The manager can help vendors feel positive about the market and about interacting with customers by setting a positive tone with a brief, positive greeting. If you can, say goodbye to them at the end of the market. Thank them for their work.

Create ways for vendors to communicate with you about the market. Offer free coffee to all vendors at the market manager's booth or table. Encourage vendors to come by and talk with you at some point during the day. These types of conversations help maintain consistent communication and give the manager and the vendors a chance to get to know each other better. They are also a great opportunity to find out what issues the vendors may have with the market. Inviting vendors to participate in the market as board members or on committees is another good way to keep the communication lines open.

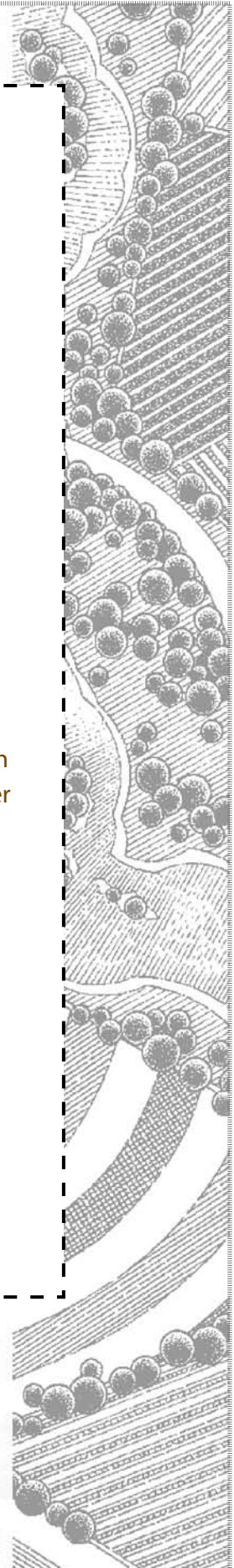
According to Dan Kuebler of Columbia Farmers Market in Missouri, "The problem we are having right now is trying to figure out how to hear all the growers. It is really difficult because most of the growers, for the most part, are just concerned about having a place to sell and if the cost is reasonable. Beyond that, they do not have a lot of energy. They are out of town, they are not close enough to communicate a lot, and a lot of these folks do not have email. I do not have email so it is difficult. But they are not shy about talking when you ask them or talk to them at the market. That seems to be the best place. I think through the years that is sort of how I myself, as a board member, have heard a lot of voices—at the market. Maybe I am not selling that day and I can go around and talk to people and hear a variety of ideas. Some of the ideas are just off the wall, you know. They are not based in reality. But you have to listen to all of them because somewhere in there is a common thread. There is no magic formula other than keep talking, keep listening, and do not stop with that."

- **Gather information.** It is a good idea to survey your vendors on a regular basis. This can be informal, such as when you walk through the market to deliver load sheets. Ask them how things are going. Find out if they have any suggestions about how to improve the market or any complaints. You can also do a more formal printed survey that you hand out to each vendor once or twice a year.
- **Evaluations.** You may want to periodically ask your vendors to evaluate the market, including how it is managed. They should be able to do this anonymously to encourage their open and honest feedback. Give each vendor an evaluation form that they can complete without identifying

Sample Vendor Survey

- How many years have you operated a stall at this market? _____
- What products do you sell at this market?
 - fruit and vegetables bakery goods meat, poultry or fish
 - flowers spices other nonfood items
- Of the products you sell at the market, what percent do you grow or make? _____%
- During what months of the year do you to sell at this market?
 - year-round from _____ to _____
- What is the average dollar amount per transaction at your stall? \$_____
- Compared to the supermarket you visit most often, this market is

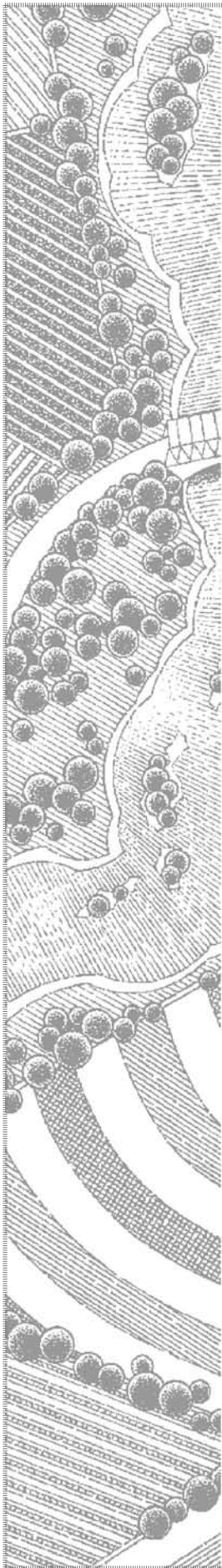
	Much Worse			About the Same				Much Better		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
a. Quality of products	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
b. Variety of products	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
c. General price level of products	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
d. Cleanliness of market	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
e. Friendliness of employees	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
f. Availability of lunch/refreshments	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
g. Parking facilities	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
h. Availability of special foods	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—



themselves and make a summary of the results of the evaluation available to them.

Once you have gathered input from the vendors, it is important to respond to the information they have given you. Make it clear that you have heard what they had to say and answer their questions or take action on things that can be easily addressed. If someone has a problem for which you do not immediately have an answer or cannot solve right away, make sure they know you are not ignoring it.

- **Newsletters and memos.** While surveys are a good way for you to find out how your vendors are doing, you need to be able to effectively disseminate information back to vendors on a regular basis. Many managers use memos that are easily hand written or computer generated and photocopied and/or newsletters to regularly communicate with vendors. These types of documents ensure that everyone receives the same information. If you have vendors who do not read English, make sure that the information gets to them in a language they understand, either by telling them personally or having someone translate the information for you.
- **Bulletin boards.** A well-placed bulletin board is another good way to communicate with vendors. Getting vendors into the habit of checking the board at each market for important news and events related to the market will save you a great deal of time otherwise spent explaining things individually.
- **Annual meetings.** Annual meetings are a useful way to get everyone involved in the market together in one place. Use this time to go over policies and procedures, report on the successes of the market, and discuss upcoming events and short- and long-range goals. Some markets make attendance at these meetings mandatory to encourage maximum participation. Vendors who do not attend run the risk of losing stall space at the market as well as their voting privileges on market issues. However, this strategy can easily backfire, especially in areas with year-round markets if vendors are committed to attending another market at the same time. It can be very difficult to schedule an annual meeting that will allow all vendors to attend. Other markets use the meetings as a time to reflect on the



market over the past year, update vendors on new regulations, or provide some training on a topic such as improved marketing procedures.

- **End of year celebrations.** Do not forget to celebrate your accomplishments. The end of the market season is a good time to get people together to recognize all the hard work they have done and reflect on the successes of the market.

Set the Right Tone

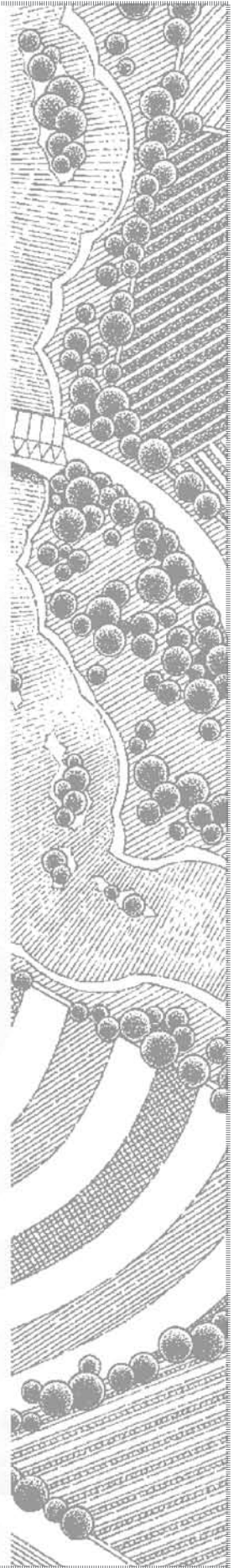
The role you play in the communication process is an extremely important part of establishing the tone of the market as a whole. As manager, you are responsible for establishing lines of communication and the general atmosphere regarding how information is passed back and forth between you and the vendors. Following are some tips for setting a positive tone for the market.

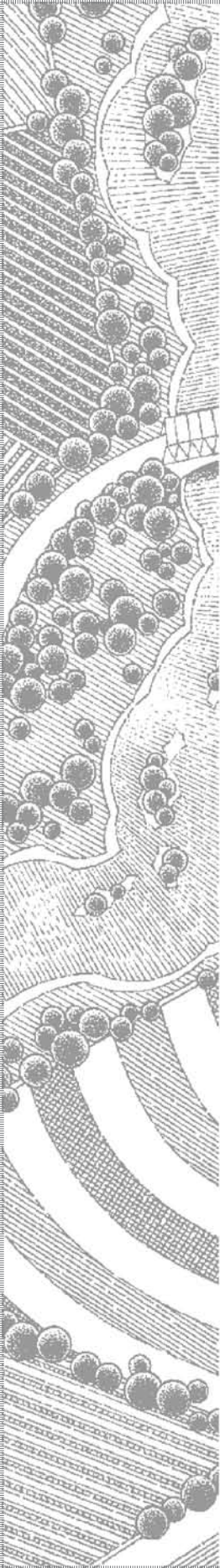
Make yourself available. All of the vendors certainly know who you are, but do they feel comfortable approaching you with questions? Are you available during the market, which is likely to be the easiest time for them to talk to you? If you give off a “do not bug me, I’m busy” attitude, chances are you will miss some valuable opportunities to answer questions, address problems, and make connections that can help avoid conflict and miscommunication down the road. Being visible and approachable, especially during market hours, will help you maintain better communication with vendors.

Be friendly and respectful. Again, your attitude sets the tone for the market. If you are rude to the vendors, it establishes an environment in which people feel free to treat each other and you disrespectfully.

Be patient with new vendors. New vendors and vendors who have not participated in the market for some time will not automatically know all the rules. Avoid giving preferential treatment to more established vendors because they are easier to deal with. Take time to explain the rules to new vendors and make them feel valued in the market.

Get vendors involved. Encourage vendors to actively participate in the larger organization of the market. Many times, farmers are too busy to offer much time volunteering, but take advantage of small opportunities to get them involved. Building vendor participation into the administration of the market through positions on the board of directors or on subcommittees and voting privileges will increase their investment in the market as a whole.





Create a team atmosphere. Kas Gurtler, manager of the Jefferson County farmers markets in Port Townsend, Washington notes that “We work hard to get all the vendors to work together and realize that they will not have personal success unless the market is successful as a whole. We have to do this together and be one entity. The manager has got to be strong to get all the vendors to work together, but also compassionate enough to realize that he or she can be wrong about something.”

Let the vendors know that you do this not just for a paycheck—that you really are concerned about the success of the market and the success of their businesses. Keep track of how vendors’ sales are doing and congratulate them if you see a significant improvement. If sales are falling for someone, ask that vendor if you can do anything to help. Let them know that you are aware of their business developments and interested in helping them make improvements where necessary.

Conclusion

Much of a market manager’s time and energy goes into creating and maintaining positive relationships with vendors. Occasionally, however, you will need to manage conflict with vendors, and the next chapter addresses ways to manage and resolve conflicts.

