

Managing Conflict with Vendors

The previous chapter dealt with building positive relationships with vendors in your market and with understanding and paying attention to your vendors' needs, the value of open communication, and how to set a positive tone. Most of your interactions with vendors are likely to be positive. Inevitably, however, conflicts will arise at your market. Chapter Ten deals with conflict resolution in general while this chapter deals specifically with conflict between the manager and vendors. If you feel frustrated by unhappy vendors who complain to you about other vendors, the way you do your job, or a lack of sales at the market, you are not alone. Unfortunately, this is one situation where you will never please 100 percent of the people 100 percent of the time.

This chapter will enable you to:

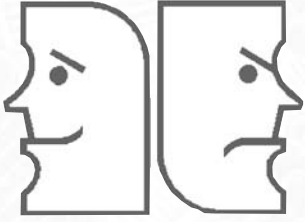
- ▶ **Put conflict in perspective and analyze sources of conflict.**
- ▶ **Be aware of ways to prevent conflicts from arising.**
- ▶ **Be aware of strategies for managing, minimizing, and resolving conflicts when they do arise.**

Sources of Conflict with Vendors

Typically, farmers are self-employed and accustomed to running their own businesses. But in the context of the market, farmers are under the authority of the market manager, creating a potentially challenging situation for the manager. If a market has twenty vendors, it will have twenty different personalities at the market each day as each vendor tries to make a living at least partly through market sales. The manager must be able to deal with all of these different people equitably and with respect no matter how difficult it may be.

Managers often find that in any group of vendors there are a few who are always unhappy no matter what you do to please them. They may accuse you of not doing enough to help their sales regardless of the fact that vendors on either side of them are doing a healthy amount of business. And, more dangerously, they may walk through the market telling other vendors what they think you are doing wrong. They may try to persuade others that you are not a good manager, that you are overpaid, that you do not really care about the success of the market, etc.

These few have the potential to occupy a great deal of your time and energy. In such a situation where it seems that there is always something wrong no matter what you do, it is important to be clear about the source of the conflict. For ex-

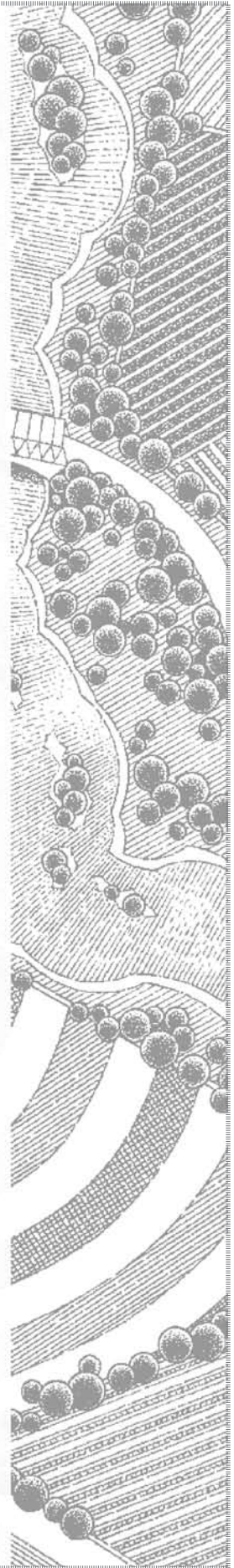


ample, if sales are dropping throughout the market and customer numbers are declining, it would be worth your time to seriously investigate the reasons behind these changes. If, however, one or two vendors are consistently unhappy because their sales are low but everyone else is doing very well, it may be that the problem is actually coming from

the vendors and is not the result of some major shift in the overall success of the market. To be sure about the source of the problem, you need to be familiar with data about your market's success. In this situation, you could compare sales figures over the past few months and to the same time the previous year to get a better identify the source of the problem. Show this information to your vendors as well so they better understand what is going on. Perhaps their sales people are giving the wrong signals to customers by reading on the job or sitting with their backs to the stand. Maybe the stall is set up in an unattractive manner. Whatever the case, it is important to identify the root of the problem and make suggestions for improvement so you do not have to spend more energy than is necessary trying to appease one or two unhappy vendors. Look for ways to turn the conflict into a question of evidence rather than an opinion or issue of personality. If you know that you have done that and the conflict persists, the problem may rest with the vendor rather than the relationship or some other solvable problem, which case your best strategy may be simply to detach and be sure you are not contributing to any escalation of the conflict.

Do Not Let Problems Go Unresolved

An atmosphere of suspicion or outright hostility that is not addressed will likely grow in severity. It is important to address problems in a straightforward and timely manner. If you know that a vendor is consistently walking through the market and saying negative things about you, take that person aside and get them to talk to you about what they think is wrong. Make sure not to embarrass vendors by reprimanding them or discussing private matters in front of others. This can exacerbate the problem. Try to hear what they are saying and see if there is a larger issue influencing their behavior. Make a plan with that person to address the problem and follow through on whatever you decide to do. You will not be able to please every person all of the time, but treating people with respect and making an honest effort to resolve conflicts will make your job much easier.



Have a Policy and Stick to It

A good market manager should have the skills needed to resolve conflicts in a way that is clear, fair, and effective. It is up to the decision-making body of your market, whether that is the manager acting alone or in conjunction with a board of directors or an advisory committee, to establish a mechanism for resolving conflict. However you decide to do this, the mechanism should be clearly written in the bylaws for the market and explained to each vendor before they begin selling at the market. Make sure every vendor gets a copy of the bylaws and signs it. This plan must include a mechanism by which vendors can file grievances. The bylaws should make it as simple and clear as possible for problems to be brought to the table and resolved.



For example, for the Carrboro Farmers Market in Carrboro, North Carolina, the board establishes all of the rules and regulations for the market, which are then put to a vote of the members, and is responsible for hearing and resolving complaints. The market manager handles day-to-day operation of the market and is effectively left out of serious conflicts. At the same time, the manager is trained in conflict resolution skills so

that he can successfully de-escalate problems. As a consequence, many issues never make it to the board. The manager may make recommendations to the board, but all decisions are made by the larger group, creating a relatively neutral position for the manager. Further, if a vendor has a complaint or accusation to make, he or she is required to put it in writing for the board. This rule discourages individuals from making petty accusations and signals to the board that conflict is potentially serious when they receive a written complaint.

In many other cases, the market manager is the sole person responsible for handling problems with vendors. If you are such a manager, consider taking a class in conflict resolution to help you deal with the personalities in your market. One manager who was also a school teacher said that the exposure he had dealing

Farmers Market Management Skills

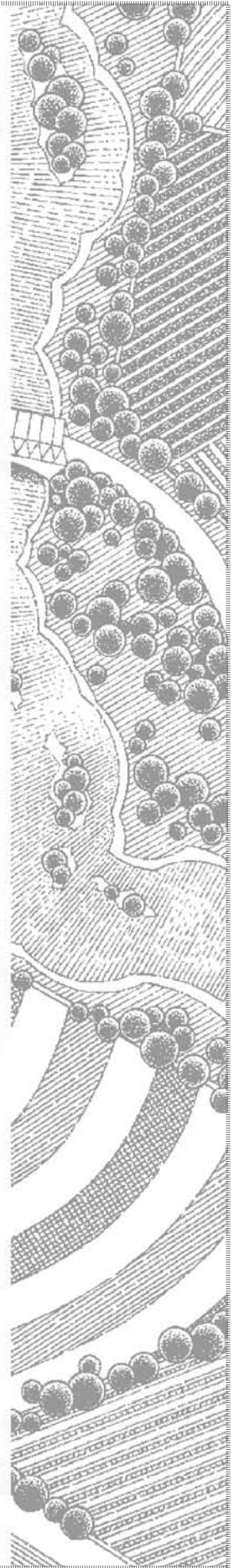
with angry parents was extremely valuable in helping him work with the diverse vendors at his market. Another manager said that a parent-effectiveness class she had taken helped her resolve conflicts. You can also talk to other farmers market managers about different ways they have found to deal with conflict in the market. As Alex Hitt of the Carrboro Farmers Market said, "It does not matter how good the bylaws are. There will be gray areas. You need someone who is good at working through the issues and then getting them down on paper. Take ideas to the board to work out and then write them into the bylaws or rules."

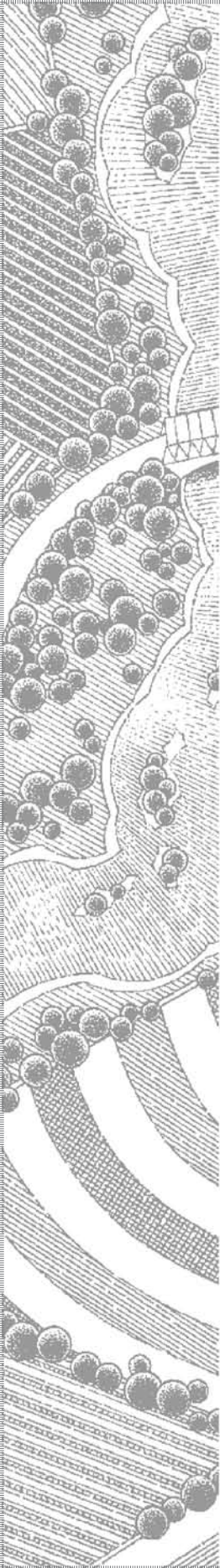
However the market is structured, the most important thing is to have the rules in writing and to show the rules to vendors before a problem arises. If you suspect that a vendor is selling someone else's produce, for example, talk to him or her about it and explain the market's policy. Show the vendor the written contract or agreement that he or she signed and take the appropriate action. For instance, some markets have a policy of simply warning the vendor the first time such activity is suspected. Give the vendor that warning in writing and keep a copy. Document the procedure so that you have a record if the problem persists. Daily market reports are a good place to keep track of this information or you may want to start a separate grievance log. If you suspect that the vendor is repeating the violation, follow the established policy, whether it is suspension from the market for a few months, a fine, or a farm visit. You also may want to talk to managers at other markets where the vendor sells to see if the problem has been occurring there as well, but consider the cost of extending this conflict outside the boundaries of your market by involving others.

Consistency in applying the rules is extremely important. If one vendor gets away with breaking the rules, you can create a domino effect and soon have many vendors who behave in a similar manner. Know what the rules are, when they are being broken, and how to address problems. If you have repeatedly spoken to one of your vendors about behavior in the market and the situation has not changed, ask one of your board members to talk to the vendor. Make sure you have the backing of your board on these issues as well so the board will support you and reinforce your efforts if a vendor will not listen to you.

Exercise Your Judgment and Your Compassion

While consistency in applying the rules is crucial, the manner in which you exercise your authority and your sensitivity to vendors go just as far as impartiality in creating a positive tone for the market. One experienced market manager told of a new manager's experience. A vendor had missed a week without notifying the manager and the rule stated that the vendor would have to pay a penalty. The next week, the vendor sent an employee to work at the market. The new manager approached





the vendor's representative at the beginning of the day and informed him of the penalty. That employee began the market day dejected about starting off "in the red." The experienced manager's critique: "I would have waited until the next day and called the farmer himself and asked what happened. Maybe he had a flat tire on his way to the market, and he should have called, but things happen."

Know your goals and priorities and treat people both fairly and with respect.

Keep Conflict out of the Spotlight

Whenever there is a conflict or potential conflict, take whatever steps you can to minimize outside involvement and customer awareness. The more people are involved, through hearsay or from sensitive conversations held within sight or hearing of bystanders, the more difficult it may be to resolve a conflict and the more repercussions the conflict may have. Furthermore, customers shop at farmers markets for the ambience and feeling of connection to a happier, simpler era as much as for the products. Their awareness of conflict detracts from that atmosphere. For many reasons, resolve conflicts as quickly and with as little outside awareness or involvement as possible.

Use Conflict Resolution Strategies

Chapter Ten deals with conflict resolution in general, offering strategies that apply to conflicts with vendors as well as with others. In that chapter you will learn to recognize the stages of conflict. Information in that chapter will also help you to identify sources of conflict, understand the perspectives involved, and handle conflict so that the solution works for all parties involved.

Conclusion

The manager and vendors are the heart of the farmers market. If the relationship between you and your vendors is marked by tension or continual conflict, it will be nearly impossible to run a successful market. Conflict resolution skills are an important part of handling inevitable difficulties, as conflict is an intrinsic part of relationships and does not need to be harmful. However, if conflict is frequent or acrimonious, it is important to examine the underlying causes and work to create a positive environment. Look to the chapters on the roles and responsibilities of the manager, on communication, and on problem solving for additional ideas.

