

## Managing Customer Relations

**A** key element of success for farmers markets is meeting the needs of the customers they serve and the communities in which they are located. Staying attuned to your customers' preferences and idiosyncrasies will help guide ongoing planning and promotion of the market. It will also result in a market that reflects the special characteristics of its locale.

**This chapter will enable you to:**

- ▶ **Recognize important elements of customer relations.**
- ▶ **Choose strategies to develop increasingly positive customer relations at your market.**

### Know Your Customers

During the planning phase of your farmers market, the organizers may have done some research to identify the demographics of the community. This information is useful for understanding the broad composition of your community, as well as for identifying potential customers, but it does not necessarily tell you who is actually shopping at your market and, depending on how long your market has been in existence, that demographic data may be so outdated as to be irrelevant.

It is important to keep track of your customer base so that you can successfully:

- Determine the product mix that will meet your customers' needs and preferences.
- Target advertising to be most effective.
- Plan events and promotions.
- Acquire and maintain sponsors.
- Reach out to those people who are not shopping at the market.

Since you are at the market most, if not all, days it is open, you probably already have a fairly good idea of who is patronizing it, as well as the range of common customer feedback, including their concerns and



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compliments. Just watching the crowd and talking to customers will provide you with information about your customer base. No doubt you sometimes hear more about the market from your customers than you would like. As Sandra Zak of the Soulard Market in St. Louis, Missouri, said, "People always know how to find me and they are not shy about telling me their opinions." On the other hand, many customers come and go from your market each day and never give any feedback. Do not assume that no news is good news. Subtle changes may accumulate until one day you realize that attendance is significantly lower than it once was.

### Customer Surveys

One way to keep track of your customers and their preferences is by conducting periodic surveys. These can be as complex or as simple as your budget, time, and energy allow. The primary objective of a customer survey is to uncover general trends as well as specific suggestions about the overall quality of the market. Surveys can also be useful for gathering information on what your customers think about:

- The quality, price, and selection of products at the market.
- Constraints on market attendance (limited parking, for example) and opportunities to grow the market.
- Any suggestions they have to make the market more enjoyable and user-friendly.

You can also use a survey to try out new ideas you have for the market. For instance, you may be considering changing the day or time of the market. If a large number of your customers indicate that they would not attend at that time, you may want to reconsider your plans.

### Other Ways to Gauge Customer Preferences

Another way to keep informed about your customers' satisfaction with the market is to post a suggestion box. Some markets display the completed suggestion cards



on a bulletin board with a response to the issue that was raised so customers know that their feedback is valued and their comments taken seriously.

Lying midway between the formality of a survey and the *laissez-faire* approach of a suggestion box are simple ideas like a question of the week. What do you want to learn about your customers' needs and preferences? Pick one question each week and ask, or have a volunteer ask, fifty customers. Some possible questions:

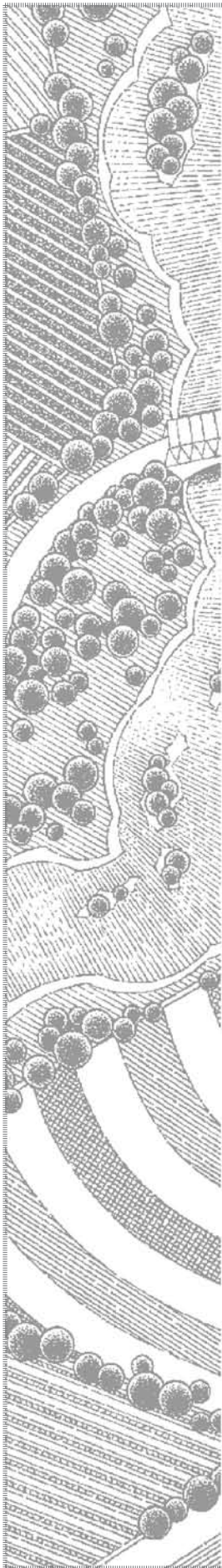
- What do you like best about the market?
- How would you rate the customer service provided by vendors? (excellent, very good, good, fair, poor)
- Is there anything you would like to buy at the farmers market that is not available?
- How often do you shop at the market?

By asking a single question of customers each week, you can obtain a great deal of data in manageable bits without overwhelming either you or your customers with a long survey encompassing everything you would like to know.

### Getting the Word Out

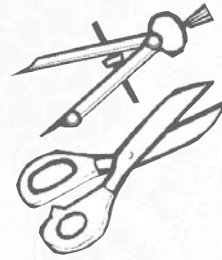
Once you know who your customers are, you need to let them know what is happening at the market. Information about promotions, events, specific crops, and other items available at the market all should be disseminated on a regular basis both to loyal customers and to the uninitiated. Furthermore, if you have a seasonal market, you have to work extra hard at the beginning of every season to regain customers who have been shopping at grocery stores during the months the market was closed. While you may gain more and more loyal customers over time who instinctively return to the market as soon as it opens in the spring or summer, there will be many others who will be more difficult to draw back. Volume Three, *Growing Your Farmers Market*, contains a chapter on promotion and publicity with guidance on drawing customers to your market and retaining those customers.

In general, markets rely on both free and paid advertising outlets. The best form of free advertising is word of mouth. If customers are happy with the market, they will tell friends and acquaintances. Other forms of free advertising include press releases, public service announcements on local radio and television stations, interviews in local media, and signs and posters that can be easily produced and reproduced. Paid advertising may come in the form of newsletters, printed posters, direct-mail flyers, and ads taken out in local papers or other media outlets. Your budget will dictate the amount you can spend, but most markets do some paid advertising.



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At the market, bulletin boards, signs, and posters are used to keep customers informed. Some markets distribute a monthly calendar or newsletter that tells customers about upcoming events, new items, seasonal produce, and even recipes for cooking with exotic (or standard) farmers market produce. Consider developing a mailing list so you can communicate with your customers with periodic flyers or reminder cards. For instance, you can use your mailing list to send your customers a notice telling them when the market will be open for the season and what the hours will be. Contests and raffles are a good way to get addresses for a mailing list.



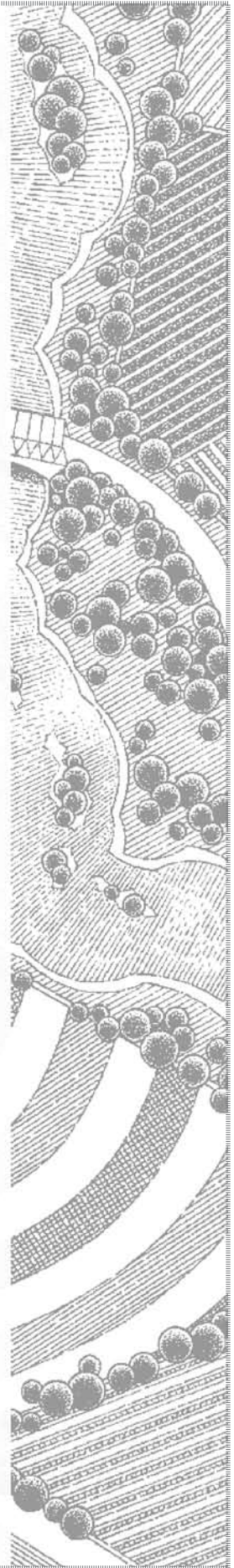
Finally, walk through the market and talk to your customers. Tell them about special promotions. Customers like the more personal attention they receive at the farmers market. Make sure everyone knows how to find you by wearing a pin, cap, or t-shirt that identifies you as the manager. Some managers enjoy wearing big funny hats, pig noses, or other silly (and easily spotted) accessories. You might also want to post a picture of yourself at the market manager's booth or table so someone who is looking for you knows what you look like.

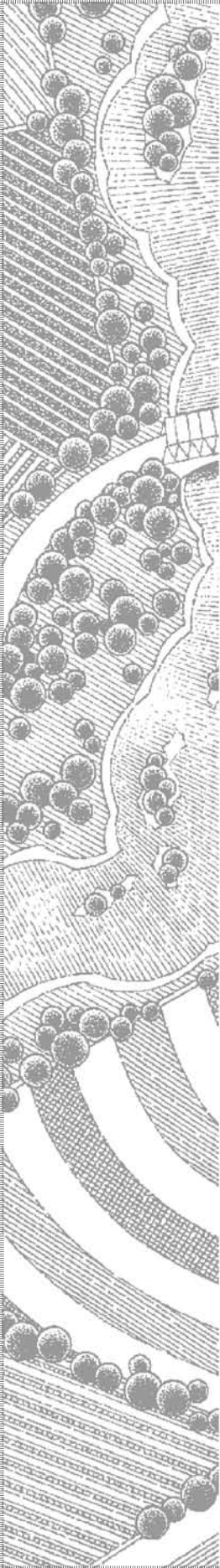
### Giving the Right Messages

When you analyze who is shopping at your market, it is important to also think about who is not shopping there. Even if your market is well attended, do not become complacent about trying to attract new customers. Take some time to consider the messages that your market communicates. Is the market intentionally or unintentionally turning off certain groups? For example, do low-income consumers feel as welcome in the market as higher-income ones? Does the market reach out to local residents who may not speak English as a first language? Or conversely, are middle-income residents in the neighborhood staying away because they have negative perceptions about the market's low-income shoppers?

Furthermore, customer relations is not only your job; it is your vendors' job as well. It is your responsibility to make sure that vendors treat customers respectfully. While a vendor's sales may be the most effective gauge of his or her behavior, a rude vendor also can have a devastating effect on customers' perceptions of the market as a whole. According to Dan Kuebler of the Columbia Farmers Market in Missouri,

*What is an interesting thing when I look at our market here is that most of our growers come from outside the city limits. A lot of those people are not really part of the community during the week. They do not live here, but they become part of the community when they come into town and they can develop those*





*kinds of relationships with their customers. As far as customers are concerned, the growers are a part of the community at that point when they are meeting them and buying from them. A word of advice to growers—you have to keep in mind that when you come into a town or a city you become part of that community. You are no longer an outsider. So you have to treat people and develop relationships as if they are your friends and neighbors—because they really are.*

Work with your vendors to help them improve their customer service skills. Some areas to focus on include:

- Making eye contact.
- Being friendly and relaxed.
- Knowing the product and being willing to answer questions about it (e.g., how crops are produced, how long they are in season, what the different varieties are).
- Offering suggestions or recipe sheets on how to prepare products.
- Providing free samples for customers to taste.

## **Appreciating Your Customers**

One way to recognize and value your customers is by holding an annual Customer Appreciation Day. This event often occurs at the end of the market season and may be promoted as a harvest celebration. Design yours to incorporate and highlight the special crops, traditions, and activities that make your market unique.

## **Handling Complaints**

As in any retail environment, customers at your market will not always be satisfied with their shopping experiences no matter what you do to provide the best assortment of quality produce and to make the market as convenient as possible. While some complaints will be valid (e.g., a large quantity of moldy blueberries found at the bottom of a basket or an overcharge by a vendor), other situations may arise simply because the customer had a fight with her child and you or one of your vendors happened to be a convenient outlet for her anger. The majority of your customers will be satisfied with their visit to the market, but the few who complain can take a great deal of your time and energy and leave you with a headache at the end of the day.

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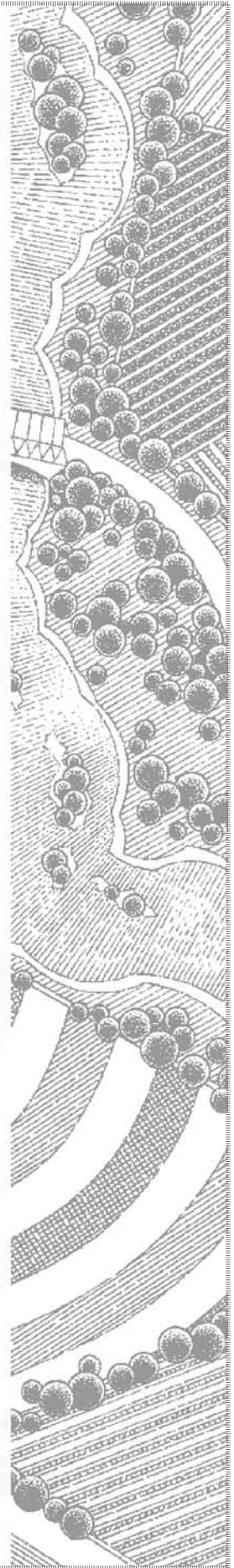
The following steps should help you deal with unhappy or difficult customers.

- First, make sure that you know the market's policies and procedures for handling complaints. Do you have a refund policy and are all the vendors aware of it? Is there a procedure for a customer to formally complain to the board if he or she has a grievance that cannot be easily resolved?
- Try to deal with problems on the spot to keep situations from escalating. Be open and willing to listen to someone who has a problem with the market. Ask open-ended questions (Who? What? Why?) and make sure the complainant knows that you are genuinely listening.
- Take immediate action on a situation if possible. For example, if a customer feels like she or he was overcharged by a vendor, talk to the vendor right away. Do not wait until after the market or tell the customer you will get the money back and send it.
- If the situation cannot be resolved immediately, plan a solution with the customer and follow through. If you need help, take the problem to your board and ask for their input and backing.
- If it becomes clear that a customer is irate about some situation that is out of your control or really has nothing to do with the market, try to remain calm and let the person have his or her say until things calm down. Yelling back at a customer or aggravating the situation further only escalates the conflict and can backfire down the road when they complain to their friends and create a negative opinion of you or the market. Remember, word of mouth travels fast. If you deal effectively and fairly with customer complaints, your reputation will reflect this.

In general, there are two types of complaints that you will hear at the market. One is conflict-oriented, such as an angry customer who was given the wrong change. The other type of complaint will be about the inherent qualities and constraints of direct-marketing. For instance, Kathy Shinneman of the Downtown Morris Farmers Market in Morris, Illinois, notes that:

*People have unrealistic expectations about what should be available and how much it should cost. They do not understand the natural growing process anymore, that mother nature has cycles. We have gotten very spoiled.*

These types of complaints are much harder to deal with because the education process required to change people's expectations, as well as their shopping hab-



its, is more difficult and happens more slowly. A major part of your job, however, is to sell your market and communicate with your customers about the benefits of shopping there. While this takes more time and energy, it is essential to retain skeptical customers once they have ventured into the market. If you respond to such comments defensively or make negative comments like “Well then go ahead and shop at Safeway,” you lose a golden opportunity to change the person’s attitude about local agriculture and seasonal eating. Taking the time to give an explanation in response to such comments could result in a life-long customer who will bring his or her friends along next time.

Shinneman deals with negative comparisons to local grocery stores by holding seasonal gardening workshops at the market in the spring and fall. These workshops educate customers about which crops grow during each season and encourage them to try gardening on their own so they begin to understand what it takes to produce the food found at the market. Many other creative solutions to

these types of problems exist—the important thing is to listen to your customers and find ways to address their concerns.

### Conclusion

Successfully managing the market’s relationship with customers means knowing what your customers want and providing it. Beyond meeting their need for fresh fruits, vegetables, and other agricultural products, though, you also create and sell an atmosphere and you do that through publicity, promotion, special events, and the day-to-day dealings and communication that you and your vendors have with customers.



