

Preparing for Opening Day

Most markets take about a year to develop and involve countless hours of volunteer work by many people. The day the market opens is the culmination of a long period of hard work, and it is an exciting event for everyone.

This chapter will enable you to:

- ▶ **Choose from suggestions and tips from managers who have opened farmers markets throughout the United States.**
- ▶ **Make your market's opening day a success.**

Following are suggestions from managers who have opened markets throughout the United States to help ensure a smooth and successful first day.

Send Invitations

Everyone who has helped in developing the market should be invited to participate in opening day activities. Also invite local officials, community leaders, local church and religious organization leaders, and local celebrities. Board members and vendors also should invite their friends and families.

At least one month prior to opening day, send out press releases to local newspapers and to radio and television stations. Be sure to mention any planned special events in

addition to the market's opening and emphasize the bounty of fresh, locally grown produce that will be available. Always highlight the potential for media photo opportunities.

Local newspapers are always interested in positive community events to cover, and the colorful richness and abundance of farmers tables piled high with produce create excellent photo opportunities. If the market plans to have cooking demonstrations or other food-related activities, make sure the food editor of the local paper receives an invitation. Events involving children also are popular with the media. As is always the case in promoting the market, delivering press releases in person, along with a basket of produce, is a great way to create a positive impression and ensure coverage.

The goal of opening day, however, is not necessarily to have all those who are invited attend the event. You want a good number of people to attend. That number is largely based on the number of vendors participating in the market. Martin Barnes, who helped organize the Davis Farmers market in Davis, California, points out that "the market has to try and get the mix just right. Too many vendors, and

they go away with leftover produce and are not excited to come back. Too many shoppers, and they will be frustrated that stall after stall is sold out or has only slim pickings.”

It may take a few weeks, a few months, or even a few seasons for the market to grow into itself and find the right balance of vendors and shoppers. In organizing the opening day, it is important to strive for a balance between the two, but do not expect perfection. Alice Whitlatch, a vendor and manager at the Cedar County Farmers Market in Tipton, Iowa, says that it took an entire summer before people in town became accustomed to the market and regularly remembered to attend it. But that market is now in its fifteenth year.

Confirm with Growers

Stay in touch with the vendors! While the manager may have seen growers at a recent grower meeting, they all will definitely need a confirmation call at least a week or so before opening day. Farmers have to deal with shifting weather, constantly changing market prices, and many other unpredictable elements. They have learned to be flexible and keep their options open. Simply because there is a schedule to keep and the market is expecting their participation does not necessarily mean that they see it the same way. Calling just one week in advance will help to give the manager a more realistic vendor count while still allowing time to contact alternates.

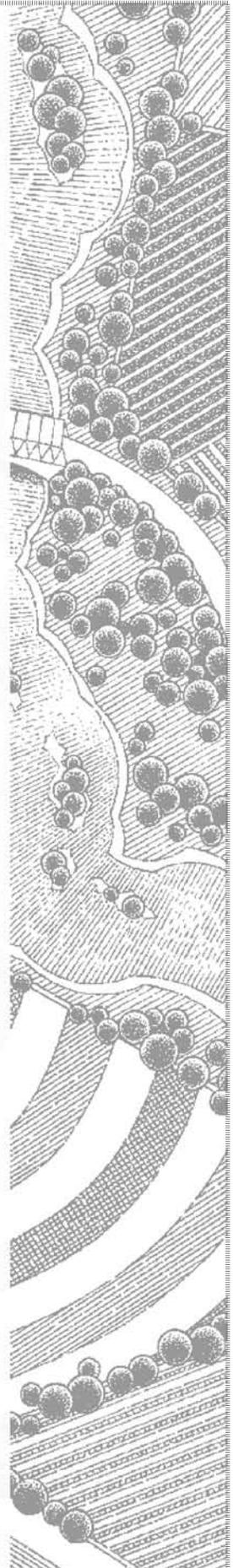
The phone calls are also important components of making vendors feel more comfortable. Make sure they are clear about the produce they can bring, the stall space they will have, and other pertinent details. Make sure they have reviewed the grower’s checklist. Ask if they have any final questions. Ask if they know when to arrive and how to get to the market. It might be wise to ask them to plan to arrive at least a half an hour early to allow for unexpected delays.

Check Permits and Licenses

As early as a month before the opening day, check to make sure all permits and licenses are in order. This will allow time to follow up on anything that might have been overlooked. It also might be wise to call local officials and run through the list of local requirements one last time. These calls will serve as a reminder of the market’s presence to emergency service agencies such as the police and fire departments.

Coordinate Staff and Volunteer Support

Plan well in advance to have sufficient staff members and volunteers to help coordinate opening day. In addition to helping with placement of signs, markers,



Organizing Entertainment

Whatever you decide, try to work with themes that unify different activities and connect them to the market.

Enlist both vendor and customer participation

whenever possible. But, realistically, do not try to do too much on opening day. There will be many opportunities in the future to expand these types of promotional activities.



and barriers, you may need volunteers to direct vendors to their stalls and to participate in crowd control and customer assistance. Larger markets can especially benefit from having extra sets of eyes at each entrance. These volunteers can help direct trucks to their parking places and keep customers out of harm's

way. During the market, they can answer customer questions, assist with enforcing market rules, and expedite urgent or emergency needs.

Be sure to make confirmation calls to all the volunteers. In addition to confirming participation, check to make sure that everyone has appropriate transportation, especially if they are expected to transport bulky or heavy items such as barricades, tables, or chairs. If there is not already a staff/volunteer contact list, put one together and distribute copies. Ease of communication facilitates smooth operations.

Prepare for Surplus Produce

Inevitably, some farmers will bring more produce than they can sell. Often, this excess produce cannot be marketed elsewhere. Whether leftovers consist of only a few bunches of greens or several cases of ripe tomatoes, it represents useful produce that can be donated to community organizations. There are organizations called gleaners that range from a local soup kitchen to a regional collector/distributor of surplus products from farms, bakeries, and grocery stores.

Vendors usually are willing to support these organizations through donations of leftover produce. It provides them with a sense of charitable good will and also saves them the hassle of hauling leftovers back to the farm where they must be discarded.

Opening Day

The Big Day—Keep It Fun!

As opening day approaches, make sure everything is in place to make it a smooth operation. Assemble sufficient people to help the market with set-up and management of opening day activities. The manager and volunteers should arrive at the market at least a few hours before opening time to put up planned decorations such as banners, signs, flags, and streamers. Set up the information booth and make sure it is staffed at all times. Remember that opening day is the most important promotional event of the year.

Vendors should arrive an hour to an hour and a half early, especially on opening day. This gives them sufficient time to locate and set up their stalls. Be sure that all the growers find the spaces assigned to them. Check that they have ample room to maneuver their vehicles and keep an eye out for unforeseen difficulties. It may become apparent after opening day, for example, that Vendor X and Vendor Y need to switch stalls due to factors that could not be foreseen. Let the vendors know ahead of time that stall assignments may change as long as a month or two after the opening.

When the local media arrive, be prepared to show them around and talk about the market. Think of sites, activities, and events that can provide particularly good photo opportunities. As mentioned earlier, it is a good idea to send reminders or stop by media offices with gift baskets.

Above all, try to remain calm regardless of how chaotic this first day appears. You cannot expect the first day to come off without at least a few hitches, and there will be plenty of time to make adjustments as the season unfolds. An organized, business-like approach and an upbeat attitude will provide everyone at the market with a sense of confidence and professionalism that will help launch the market into a successful season.





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The Farmers Market Management Series

Several years ago, having observed trends in the evolution of food marketing, I decided it would be a good idea to professionalize management of farmers markets by, among other things, developing and making available a Farmers Market Management professional development curriculum. I approached the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Marketing Service (USDA AMS) for seed money to launch the project, and the agency was supportive in helping the UC Small Farm Center get the project off the ground.



The project has proceeded deliberately since its inception with support from the Small Farm Center.

Happily, the center has now produced three primary volumes as a foundation for the curriculum: *Starting a New Farmers Market*, *Farmers Market Management Skills*, and *Growing Your Farmers Market*.

I wish to acknowledge the early support of this project by Errol Bragg of USDA AMS and, more recently, by USDA's Risk Management Agency. Also, farmers market managers throughout the country were extremely cooperative in sharing their experiences and insights regarding the many aspects of their work.

The UC Small Farm Program and Small Farm Center were early advocates of farmers markets and facilitated education in this regard. This series is part of the Small Farm Program's contribution to the 21st Century's evolution of farmers markets. Please read also our companion farmers market publications, *Managing Risks and Liability at California Certified Farmers Markets* and *Food Safety at Farmers Markets and Agritourism Venues*.

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