

## MASTERING MARKETING



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## To Be or Not to Be a Farmers Market Vendor-Is That Your Question?

My apologies to William Shakespeare for mangling the opening phrase of a soliloquy spoken by Prince Hamlet in Shakespeare's play by the same name. But, as producers start drawing up their marketing plans for 2019, market vendors are questioning whether sales from farmers markets are still truly profitable.

An agency marketing person declared to me recently, "Farmers Markets in Maryland are dead". At the risk of misappropriating another literary quote, Mark Twain said, "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated".

There is no doubt however, farmers market sales have been on a downward slide. I track market sales in Maryland and found that sales were noticeably off in the latter part of the 2016 market season - particularly in the urban cusp markets. Sales started out brisk in 2017 but stalled after the July 4th holiday, ironically just when summer's bounty was hitting the market. Sales never really took off in 2018 and with the number of rainy day markets, the vendors in my survey reported sales for the season down from 10% to 40%. This seemed to be statewide. That may not seem to be a lot in most cases, unless sales from farmers markets are the farm's primary income source.

So what happened to sales? The Farmers Market Coalition reports that there were more than 8,500 farmers market in the US in 2016-50% more than just five years earlier. With increased purchasing opportunities, perhaps the better question is what happened to consumer attendance and purchases at the markets? Most marketing surveys tell us that consumers are looking for two major attributes when purchasing almost anything- choices (related to quality) and convenience. Farmers markets can be

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challenged to provide these two attributes consistently.

Farmers markets and supporting agencies have done a good job getting out the call to “Buy Local”. Other retail food outlets have not let this marketing momentum pass them by. Food shoppers can now find fresh, local produce and fruits in their grocery store, health food store, local market, delivered to their door, in a prepared meal kit, in a CSA box, or through a buying club. These outlets have increased the total sales of locally produced foods but have become an alternative shopping experience to attending a farmers market.

By-in-large- shopping at a farmers market is not convenient. Customers have to make a special stop to buy only on certain days and at certain times. Usually they cannot purchase all their shopping needs at the market so still must shop at another food outlet. Not all vendors accept electronic payments, requiring customers to bring cash or visit an ATM before coming to the market. While there have been herculean efforts to make fresh produce and fruits available to food-insecure populations, much less effort has been to deliver the message of why shop at a farmers market to target groups such as Millennials or those with higher disposable incomes.

So why should producers even consider joining a farmers market in 2019? Though the numbers are important, sometimes they don't show the whole picture. Farmers markets can still be an excellent component in your total marketing strategy if you plan to:

- 1) Connect with your long-time customers and provide the same quality products they've purchased in the past. As loyal customers, ask them to tell they're family and friends about the market and the excellent products you sell there.
- 2) Collect sign-ups and contact information for your email newsletter list. Social media is great, but you don't own your content. An email marketing list gives you a chance to connect directly with customers, even after market season has ended.
- 3) Use the market to test new product acceptance or learn new food trends from your customers. This is real-time market research that you can conduct while still making sales. Do customers walk right by your booth, look at your product but move on, or are there certain items that always draw customers to your booth? Observe what customers are silently telling you about your booth or product display and make changes as needed.
- 4) See how other vendors display, package, or vary their product offering. Look and learn.
- 5) Be on the lookout for other community events or sales opportunities you might join in.
- 6) Get your promotional materials directly into your customers' hands. Coupons, announcements and recipes can go right into their bag so they have a tangible reminder about your farm when they get home.
- 7) Sell, sell, sell. You can't make sales if you're not at the market.

Slow sales days at the farmers market can be very frustrating and if the market is consistently costing you money to participate in, then don't renew your participation. But, usually you're investing in this marketing channel for the long run. Like investing in anything, you need to stay in the game over time to maximize your investment. This isn't a literary quote but one that might still apply – “Come to the dance, but sit close to the door.”