

“I Come Here Every Week”

Tools for Building Customer Loyalty at Farmers’ Markets

June 2017

Customer traffic is essential to farmers’ market success. Markets with robust sales provide adequate return to vendors, offer a wide array of products, and create a vibrant community gathering place. Markets face growing competition for busy customers, and the most successful markets employ multiple strategies to attract and retain a strong customer base.

One cost-effective approach is to encourage existing customers to buy more, buy more frequently, or become ambassadors for the market. In 2016 and 2017 CISA tested several customer loyalty tools in partnership with both winter and summer farmers’ markets.



Forest Park Farmers’ Market
photo: Elizabeth Solaka

Most Popular

Rewards card/punch card for frequent shoppers:

This card is similar to the “buy ten, get one free” cards offered by many merchants. Each time shoppers come to the market, they get their card punched at the market manager’s booth. Once they’ve visited the market a certain number of times—we chose six visits—they are eligible for a prize. Vendors donated prizes like a pint of maple syrup or a small bag of apples, but markets also used market tokens or t-shirts. One market chose to reward all customers that completed the card with a small amount of money to spend at the market and found customer response to be overwhelmingly positive.

This was the most popular loyalty tool in our study. Ninety-four percent of participating markets will continue using the cards. Cards are inexpensive to print, familiar to customers, and easy to use.

Suggestions for success:

- An outgoing market manager can more effectively publicize the program and engage customers than a static sign.
- Wallet-sized cards are easier to use than the slightly larger business card size. One market filed customer cards in a recipe box at the market manager’s booth so customers did not need to remember them.
- Vendors are often happy to offer product for prizes, although one challenge can be that it is harder for vendors selling more expensive items to contribute.
- Some very small markets rotated the task of stamping the cards among vendors each week.

Feedback from customers: Market customers at our focus groups reported that they preferred receiving a small, immediate prize, like some additional produce or a market token, rather than being entered in a drawing for a larger prize.



Visit the Market Manager’s Booth to get your card punched. After attending six markets, turn your card in to be entered in our monthly drawing!

Name: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

CISA strengthens local farms and engages the community to build the local food economy.

CISA community involved in sustaining agriculture

Effective with Effort

A tablet, such as an iPad, to collect shoppers' contact information, take photographs, and offer real-time social media contact with customers:

Tablets (or smartphones) open up a wide variety of communications options. One of the most basic is collecting legible customer contact information in order to send newsletters or market reminders. Some markets make great use of Facebook and Instagram, sometimes during the market itself, to remind customers about the market and entice them with the day's offerings. These techniques can harness the power of social media to make market customers ambassadors for the market.

Suggestions for success:

- It's easier to collect customer contact information on a tablet, but more market managers may have and be willing to use their personal smartphone, which reduces the out-of-pocket costs of this technology to a market.
- Mentoring or training can go a long way here to help markets effectively use technology and social media. Market managers were eager for examples of successful use of tablets or smartphones for market promotion and training on how to use social media on the go.
- Live streaming to Facebook was found to be useful for promoting day-of activities or surprise products at the market.



Amherst Winter Farmers' Market
photo: Elizabeth Solaka

Feedback from market managers: Fewer markets used iPads, but the ones that did were very enthusiastic. Barriers remain, however: it's hard to find time at a busy market to take and post photos, and it is easier for some market managers to shoot compelling pictures and write pithy text than it is for other managers.



Northampton Winter Farmers' Market
photo: Elizabeth Solaka

Customer benefit activities, such as Kid's Days, sampling, and food preparation demonstrations:

These are familiar activities at larger urban markets, but can be hard for smaller, understaffed markets to pull off. Our goal was to help markets create activities once, hoping that repeating them the following season would be easier.

Feedback from market managers: Events are very well-received by customers. They don't necessarily increase sales on the day of the event, but they improve customer and community satisfaction. Even with support from a non-profit like CISA, they are hard for understaffed markets to accomplish.

Potentially Effective

Texting app for customer communications.

CISA offered to pay texting app fees and created a guide to using texting for market promotion, explaining legal requirements such as customer opt-in rules. However, few of the markets in our region chose to use texting for market communication.

The out-of-pocket costs of a texting app are quite low, and we believe that text reminders could be a valuable tool for market customer communication. Market managers rightly recognized, however, that effective use of texting would require an up-front and ongoing investment of time and attention. The response of market managers to this option confirms that many farmers' markets operate on a shoestring, lacking a business structure that would allow them to invest in activities that could help build their success.

“Friend of the Market” buttons:

Modeled on a button used at the Coventry Regional Farmers' Market in Coventry, Connecticut, where customers who purchase and wear buttons are rewarded with small surprise giveaways from vendors—a cucumber or carrot added to whatever they had purchased, for example.

Feedback from market managers: Few markets wanted to try buttons. Those that did reported that customers—especially a market's biggest fans—like getting buttons, but they didn't want to pay for them. Market managers thought buttons could be a great way to celebrate a market event or anniversary, but didn't believe they were an effective method of building customer traffic or creating market ambassadors. Market managers also commented that the effort involved in working with vendors to coordinate giveaways would be time consuming, and that they did not have the resources or time to organize that effort.



Brimfield Farmers' Market



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community
involved in sustaining
agriculture

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