



How One Manager Makes Issues Look Easy: The Dane County Farmers' Market Story

The Dane County Farmers' Market (DCFM) is the largest farmers' market in the U.S. with over 300 vendors stretching all around the two-block, state capitol square in Madison, Wisconsin. About 25,000 people come to the market each Saturday in a city of 200,000, and recently-retired market manager Mary Carpenter attributes the market's phenomenal attendance to several factors. Its customer base is "middle class to affluent," and the market is close to the University of Wisconsin at Madison, one of the largest universities in the country. "It's a very health conscious city," Carpenter says. "The university was one of the most radical campuses in cities in the 60s, and I think the market has bloomed into a great farmers' market."

Another factor in the market's success is that its customers include a wide variety of ethnic groups. For example, about 10% of the market vendors at the market are Hmong. Carpenter says she feels the market's vendor base should reflect people who are growing and producing crops and reflect local agriculture.

There is a two-year waiting list for qualified persons wishing to join the market. After about ten years as "daily vendors" members

may graduate to "season stall" status which allows them to have the same assigned spot each week. Only about 40% of vendors have "season stalls"; thus, more than half the vendors must arrive by 6 a.m. to line up by seniority. At 6:30 these "daily vendors" drive onto the square in an orderly manner and claim any open space, including any "season stalls" vacant that day. "We have 20 to 30 new vendors coming in each year from the waiting list," Carpenter adds. "They help bring fresh ideas to the market."

The DCFM is strictly foods, flowers and fibers; no crafts are allowed at the market. Even flowers can be sold only as flowers, not with bows or ribbons. "Variety is what brings customers to the market," Carpenter says. "One vendor brings 200 different kinds of herbs."

The market is run on a free-market basis, rather than having a lot of rules and regulations about product quality. Carpenter feels market competition encourages and even demands that growers bring their best, what customers want. "You don't get away with bringing seconds or poor produce because so many growers have great produce at the market."

One market rule that is enforced firmly is the strict "farmer-grown" policy. Resellers are strictly forbidden at the market; everything sold has to be raised by the vendor, and they can be booted out of the market for violations. Each vendor is required to sign a contract that allows the market to do a drop-in inspection at any time, for any reason. If the vendor refuses to allow an inspection, they are automatically expelled. "If a person is selling eggplant and they don't show me the eggplant in the field, they're out," Carpenter says. "It has been years, however, since a grower refused an on-farm inspection. In fact, they are always very proud of what they grow and are anxious to show off their operations. We've had only one or two expulsions a year of people reselling product."

When asked if such a strict to farmer-grown policy could work in a small-town, start-up market where some managers claim the need to relax the farmer-grown rules in order to diversify the market, Carpenter has an interesting answer: "Personally I wouldn't manage any other type of market. We started with 11 vendors. They would get demands and they would do whatever it took to grow it. They could not depend on bring-

ing it in from somewhere else. And the market just grew naturally.”

The DCFM has developed a unique solution to the “big vs. small farmer” issue when small growers feel outgunned by big growers renting multiple booth spaces. Each vendor is given a 16-foot maximum frontage, which levels the playing field. “It also encourages vendors to be very creative in their marketing,” Carpenter says. “We don’t want someone’s bank account dictating how much space they have — 16 feet is the absolute limit.”

Another factor that contributes to the market success, Carpenter

feels, is that the organization has a board of entirely vendor members. “We’re an independent, self-governing, nonprofit organization. When it’s a self-governing body, you listen to people. We’re dealing with our own problems and we don’t have to explain them to people who don’t understand what we’re doing. The board is very independent and responsive to vendor needs, and active people tend to attend board meetings.”

Bounty from bounty, the market supplies 11 food banks every Saturday. “At 11:30 a.m. the food bank people come by with carts,

and a lot of growers say ‘take the table’ and some even bring some extra for that purpose,” Carpenter says. In addition, every fall a large charity dinner is held to support the food bank. The market donates the raw goods, top Madison chefs cook the food, food bank volunteers serve, and all the proceeds from a \$14 dinner go to the food banks.

Does Carpenter have any management tips to pass along? “Only that you deal with things with a sense of humor,” Carpenter laughs. “And it doesn’t hurt that I was a teacher.” ❁