

## *Special Events at Your Market*

*by Lynn Bagley*



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**E**vents can hurt sales if they draw people who are not coming to buy. Events should promote the farmers' market concept which is to re-establish communications between rural and urban culture. Lots of people are looking for their rural roots again. We celebrate the seasons, for example, and in grocery stores there is no season.

Keep the focus on food! The purpose of special events is to promote the market. You want the attendees to come back, so before having special events, make sure your producers are providing high-quality products and services to build customer loyalty and bonding. Help keep customers coming back with constant new excitement, educational, food-related events and thematic entertainment, but don't get too far from "who you are" such that special events detract from food sales. Events that have nothing to do with food or agriculture may promote sales for that one day, but in the long run they

attract a different customer base and hurt sales.

When you have a glut of one thing (cherries, peaches, etc.) have a tasting! This turns a not-so-good-situation into a better situation. With each tasting event that you do, emphasize the quality and variety of produce to be found at the market. Studies show this is what draws the people to the farmers' markets. Whatever products you have that the supermarkets don't have, e.g., heirloom varieties of apples, a tasting helps show them off and highlights your competitive edge over the supermarkets.

In April or May flower-glut time, bring in the nurseries to talk about flower care, the local water district to talk about water-saving techniques, or chefs to do a demo on cooking with flowers.

Plan special events around what your target customer may want. Synergy begins to build and expands with diversity. With seniors, for example, you can do a "Senior Health Fair," including a range of senior health services and nutrition counseling. Involve local businesses; get employees out at lunch-time by serving some special lunches. Each person you hook

may tell 10 people.

You want your market to serve as many different types of the population as possible. Target special events to attract population segments, e.g. certain ethnic groups or a wealthy clientele. If your demographics allow it, go after the "green consumer," and you'll have a repeat customer. At the markets they can find foods grown without pesticides and a chance to help farmers preserve farmland and the greenbelt around the city. Green consumers tend to be very loyal and often have more money and tend to better educated — they are a "natural" for the farmers' markets.

One way to attract the the "green consumer" is with Earth Day and organic events. Help celebrate Earth Day with a festival and also have a year-round sign describing how farmers' markets are ecological and thus a celebration of every day as earth day. An Organic Tasting Event allows you to educate people on what is "No Spray," what is "transitional," what is actually organic, and to show people how good organic products really are.

Another way to plan great special events at your markets is to look for businesses or community groups you can network with. Look at a Calendar of Events in the newspaper for upcoming events and call the organizations to see if they'd like to come to the market to promote their organization. Read the paper and look for food, garden or agriculture-related events or experts to find people who may contribute to the market. You might find someone who can provide a gardening or cooking demo or even teach a series of classes at the market.

Take advantage of the schools. They love coming out to the markets for Farm Day. Invite teachers and classes, and invite school boards to participate in planning. Invite the Farm Bureau and Cooperative Extension. Have a mural contest, an essay contest, a photo contest. Have a live story: "Where does lunch come from?"

Prepare a teacher packet that

explains where food comes from and talks about the diversity of fruits and vegetables, etc. Have agriculture exhibits about food, where clothes come from, a recycling center, and Peter Rabbit's garden. When we get children thinking about where their food comes from, we create our future.

In conjunction with the Marin Community Food Bank around Valentine's Day, for example, the Marin County Farmers' Market held a "Have a Heart Day." A big red heart with lace around it was placed on a table, suggesting that people buy food at the market and donate for the Food Bank. To promote heart-healthy fruits and vegetables, market volunteers put little hearts on all the fruits and vegetables that are beneficial for the heart. A xeroxed list was passed out of "Heart Healthy Fruits and Vegetables."

Start out small and simple with special events, and build on it more and more. Don't plan so many

events at once that you can't do them right. Don't try to do it all yourself. Have a special event coordinator and develop volunteers, partnerships and collaborators to help. Don't call it a special event unless you're really doing something special.

Don't do the same "special events" over and over. Build on them! Build fund-raisers in conjunction with special events to promote the market in general. In the beginning when you have little or no money to spend on advertising, spend money on special events instead of large paid ads and promote these with press releases, PSAs, signs at the markets, etc.

Plan for getting maximum coverage from media. Get last year's photos to print prior to the event and shoot new photos to send the newspapers for printing after the event as well. Send out press packets early and repeat releases two weeks before the event. ✨