

## *Benefits of Farmers' Markets for Vendors, Consumers & Communities*

### **Why Farmers Markets Are Growing**

#### *Food imports*

With the flood of produce imports coming into the country from overseas, even larger commercial growers are taking a second look at high-return marketing outlets like farmers' markets. Felix Fly, manager with the West Tennessee Farmers' Market in Jackson, Tennessee, says the number of farmers applying to sell in their farmers' market blossomed in 1999. "Normally we have 12 or 14 new vendor applicants each year, but this year we've had 51 by August," he said. "Due to the low prices this year in cattle, cotton, soybeans, hogs, and corn, we've found a lot of growers trying something new. I just got a call from someone growing pumpkins who had never grown them before."

#### *Urban growth*

According to Rose Koenig, Mgr., Haile Village Farmers Market, Gainesville, FL, "The agricultural economy is changing drastically in the U.S. What was profitable 50 years ago may not be profitable tomorrow. As land gets more expensive because of urban growth, small farms of 100 acres or less will get more and popular. This leaves growers with the choice of selling the land to developers or getting into higher value farming such as direct marketing. Some growers

will sell out, and some will reduce acreage and start growing for a local market."

#### *Health, taste & local food*

The growth in farmers' markets is fueled by public awareness on how to eat better. Customers want to know where their food is grown and who grew it.

"People are following a healthy lifestyle, and are putting more attention into what they're eating.

—Charlie Haney, Mgr., Olympia Farmers' Market, WA

### **Farmer Benefits**

Sellers at farmers' markets often get a larger cash return for their product than through wholesale marketing and get paid cash-in-hand, instead of waiting 30-90 days or longer. There is also the pride and fun in selling to the people who enjoy eating your produce.

[See also Chapter One, "Advantages, Disadvantages"]

### **Consumer Benefits**

Most farmers' market customers come to the markets for the superior quality and freshness, unusual varieties, and a chance to support local agriculture and meet the farmers who grow their food. And if these shoppers can get much higher quality at a competitive price, they're getting a lot better value for their money!

"American consumers want several qualities in their food bas-

kets beyond those provided by factory farming with its stress on volume, uniformity and price. They want local or regional, and hence fresher, food. They want varied food—no iceberg lettuce but more heirloom tomatoes. They want food with fewer health risks from chemicals. They want food produced with methods less likely to harm the environment. And they want to restore contact with the actual producer of the food."

—Susan Planck, Wheatland Vegetable Farms, Purcellville, VA

#### *Taste and freshness*

Farmers' markets offer shoppers the opportunity to purchase fresh-picked, good-tasting, seasonal produce from the farmers who grow it. Direct-from-the-farm products are often picked at the peak of maturity only a day or even hours before they are sold at farmers' markets. Once people taste what's available at the farmers' market they don't want to go back to the taste they get from the supermarket. Nothing substitutes for a vine-ripened, fresh-picked tomato, or a peach, corn or baby bok choy.

"Commercial fresh tomatoes epitomize the shortcomings of modern produce, but many fruits and vegetables also suffer from reduced flavor. One study showed that the typical peach is 2 1/2 weeks old by the time it gets to the grocery store. By con-

trast, that same peach found at a farmers' market was probably picked in the past two days."

—"Taking It To the Streets," *Farmer to Farmer*

### **Variety**

At farmers' markets customers are able to sample new products and varieties not ordinarily found in supermarkets. While supermarkets usually offer only one or a few varieties of a product, direct markets may sell many different varieties of one product, such as apples, peaches, peppers or tomatoes, as well as exotic and heirloom products, organically grown produce, and ethnic foods.

### **Value**

Many markets have been established to provide customers with fresh produce at lower prices than local supermarkets. In other cases the goal has been to provide fresher, superior product at competitive prices. Either way, the customer finds better value, which is defined by the relationship between product and price.

### **Social**

Farmers markets are fun! Farmers markets are important social events. People run into friends and talk, or meet new ones including farmers to exchange recipes. In fact, some markets have adopted the slogan: "Come for the freshness; stay for the fun!"

Some say that the attraction of farmers' markets is fundamentally a human one. Shoppers at farmers' markets have seven times as many social interactions in a farmers' market as they do in a grocery store! Certainly, they are a return to a form of business and social interaction common for thousands of

years, where consumers purchased goods more directly from those who produced them.

Customers come to trust farmers. Other customers intuitively follow that trust. The relationship one has with a produce clerk who doesn't know what country the tomatoes come from simply can't compare with a friendship with a farmer who can tell you what his soil tastes like, why she doesn't irrigate, how the Ace compares with a Zebra, the recipe for her best sauce, or how many weeks before he says so-long for the season.

### **Urban/Rural Connection**

Many farmers as well as consumers report that the farmer-consumer bond is the heart and soul of the markets. An article in *NW Health* (May/June 1995) noted: "These stalls of sustenance may be the last place where many people can reconnect with food and its sources. The growers' offerings, which vary week to week, remind us that there is a season for everything."

### **Community Benefits**

A successful farmers' market can be a tremendous resource for a community, large or small. Fresh food is available at a reasonable price, the local agricultural economy as well as the marketplace area receives an economic boost, and a festive and community-enhancing social center draws people together. Farmers' markets, in addition, help fight hunger through their participation in food recovery programs and federally funded subsidy programs.

### **Gathering place**

When Shakespeare comes to the Ithaca Farmers' Market alongside central New York's Cayuga Lake,

people are reminded of the market's role in integrating economic, social and cultural activities in one place.

"To visit a Greenmarket is to realize the power that a farmers' market can wield in transforming an urban space into an exciting and vibrant community. The more that Greenmarkets become fixtures in city neighborhoods, the more they resemble the proverbial backyard fence where neighbors meet to exchange recipes and gossip and concerns about their streets."

— *Barriers & Opportunities for Direct Marketing*, Farmers' Market Trust

### **Barriers bridged**

Whenever people from various walks of life cross paths, there is an opportunity for learning. Stereotypes are broken. Voters no longer look dispassionately at rural issues when farming friends may be affected.

In many communities a politician cannot be elected without campaigning at the farmers' market. In San Luis Obispo, California, every candidate is given three minutes on a flatbed trailer festooned with red, white and blue bunting. "Thursday Night" is about more than simply food transactions; it is a community event.

"At first farmers' markets sales were viewed by town fathers as inconsequential. But now they're really beginning to understand the vital camaraderie that exists between the farmers' market seller and city folk."

—Jim Jones, FM Representative, Texas Dept. of Agriculture

### ***Economic revitalization***

Farmers' markets transform cities. City planners nationwide now recognize the value of the farmers' market. They have evidence that it revitalizes a downtown area like nothing else, by creating an active meeting place and income-producing community. More and more cities are viewing farmers' markets as a positive addition to their cities. The National Main Street Program has incorporated markets as a vehicle to rejuvenate declining downtown areas.

"Most managers felt that farmers' markets and the farmers who attend them are viewed positively by their host communities. The majority of market managers (78%) felt that their markets positively affect local businesses, primarily by bringing customers from both inside and outside the community. Several managers gave examples of businesses located in the vicinity of their markets that had expanded their hours to benefit from the increased customer traffic. This revitalization function is commonly used by downtown merchant associations and redevelopment agencies as a rationale for starting a farmers' market."

— Farmers' Markets and Rural Development Project

"The downtown merchants are behind the markets because restaurant owners realize that people don't buy produce at the markets to eat, but to take home. Having the markets nearby gives people more reasons to come downtown. As an inducement to sell at the market, many restaurants guarantee that farmers will sell out—if they don't sell out by

3 p.m., the restaurant will buy the remaining produce for their next few days' needs. They encourage the farmers to bring a wide variety. There also has been a shift in the make-up of downtown businesses. They don't have a lot of grocery stores, so in the downtown there is not a lot of competition. The merchants perceive the markets as complementary rather than directly competitive."

—Donald Coker, Florida Dept. of Ag and Consumer Services

### ***Grocery impact***

Ken Meyer, produce buyer for three Alfalfa's Markets in Colorado, says his chain has been a loyal customer to many of the growers doing business in the open-air market. "The markets get people excited about organics, and having them just down the street does mean some cross-over business."

"Farmers' markets probably affect grocery stores to the tune of less than one percent of their produce sales," says Jim Anderson of the Missouri Department of Agriculture. "Our markets - 55 statewide, most in rural communities - are only open between two and six days a week, six months a year, and they don't seem to have any impact on the grocery store's produce section."

For many years the family-owned Williams Brothers supermarkets in San Luis Obispo County, CA, allowed farmers' markets in their parking lots. It gave them a leg over their competitors and showed their support for local farmers.

"We're about a block from Alfalfa's Market and they were concerned about competition.

Now 13 years later, they discovered produce sales went up 30% on Saturday when we were open."

— John Ellis, Boulder FM, CO

### ***Improved identity***

"According to Richard McCarthy, executive director of the Economics Institute, "The Market makes downtown safer because there are people on the street. It changes the feel of the neighborhood from that of a cold, impersonal urban environment to that of a community. Even vendors who once moved away from New Orleans now have a completely different experience of the city when they come to town for Market."

— Economics Institute, *1999 Report to the Community*

"Downtown businesses have also benefited from the Market's presence on Saturday mornings—which, otherwise, is not a busy time of the week for most of them. The AB Freeman study estimated that downtown businesses gain additional income of \$450,000 a year as a result of the Market, and a 30%-70% increase in Saturday-morning traffic as a result of the Market."

— Economics Institute, *1999 Report to the Community*

### ***Access***

"Ironically, farmers' need for more and diverse markets occurs at a time when supermarket relocation to the suburbs has left many Philadelphians underserved. Inner city residents in particular have little choice but to rely on convenience stores that provide very limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables. The diets of

lower-income residents offer poor nutrition, affecting the health and well being of individuals and their communities. Establishing farmers' markets in these low-income communities can serve the dual objectives of increased access to fresh produce for city residents and improved farm profitability."

— *Barriers & Opportunities for Direct Marketing*, Farmers' Market Trust, 1999.

The impetus for farmers' markets in southern California came from the Interfaith Hunger Coalition of the Southern California Ecumenical Council. Concerned about supermarket flight and inner-city residents' access to fresh produce at reasonable prices, they spearheaded a three-year, seven-market development program which exceeded its goals.

Donna Bryan vocalized similar concerns through Seeds of Hope when starting numerous markets in South Carolina. The faith community has been critical in develop-

ing countless markets by providing church lots as market locations, giving financial support and leading many organizing efforts.

### ***Local food and greenspace***

Lindsey Ketchel, horticultural marketing specialist with the Vermont Department of Agriculture, Food and Markets, reported on a recent department study of Vermont consumers. More than 60 percent were interested in buying local products and said they'd spend up to 10 percent more just to support local family farms. "Consumers are looking for ways to support the local greenspace," Ketchel said. "At the same time, it's a challenge for consumers is to find local products. They can't go to a Grand Union supermarket and find local produce. Farmers' markets are not just about buying food," she continued. "They bring farmers and consumers together in a community way. It's all about celebrating food grown in our own regions."

"From an ecological standpoint, shopping at farmers' markets helps support the greenbelt by enabling local farmers to become economically sustainable. It supports locally-based food production and distribution, thus reducing energy consumed on transportation. It also reduces solid wastes, by eliminating over-packaging of foods and supports environmentally sound and sustainable farming practices because family farmers tend to use fewer synthetic chemicals."

— Lynn Bagley, with the Golden Gate FM Assoc. in Novato, CA, quoted in *To Market! To Market!* University of Mass. Cooperative Extension System

"When you shop at a supermarket only 21% of every dollar spent goes toward actual food production whereas at the market more than four times that goes back to the growers."

—Ann Harvey Yonkers, Mgr., FRESHFARM Market, Washington, DC

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