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## Developing a Farmers' Market Volunteer Team in Lieu of a Paid Manager

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## **Developing a Farmers' Market Volunteer Team in Lieu of a Paid Manager**

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**Abstract:** Rural farmers' markets unable to justify a paid manager may benefit from the development of a farmers' market volunteer team. This articles looks at sources of farmers' market volunteers, specific duties of such a team, and education and orientation requirements to ensure the success of these volunteers.

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### **Introduction**

Although the community foods movement and, in particular, farmers' markets have grown substantially over the past three decades, many rural locations continue to struggle with building a successful farmers' market, due in part to challenges that relate to attracting vendors or finding funds for marketing or recordkeeping expenses (Meier, 2009). A successful farmers' market meets the demand for locally grown products and provides economic incentives for growers. Larger urban markets are likely to employ a dedicated, third-party market manager to deal with issues relevant to vendor and customer satisfaction and, thereby, market growth. However, these positions are by and large funded with grower membership and gate fees, and smaller, rural markets without access to sufficient funds cannot justify hiring a manager. A corps of volunteers may be an effective way to serve some of the same functions as a paid manager might at a rural market.

According to Farr (2006), some of the essential functions of a paid, full-time farmers' market manager might include:

- Supervision of market operations
  
- Assignment of space to vendors

- Enforcement of market rule
- Collection of gate and membership fees
- Collection of pricing data
- Product inspection
- Supervision of product display
- Explanation of market procedures and expectations
- Fielding complaints, suggestions and questions from farmers and customers
- Market promotion

With adequate education, most of these duties could be performed by a volunteer team. When working in conjunction with Extension staff, essentially all these duties could be adequately fulfilled by volunteers.

## Development of a Volunteer Team

Within Extension, farmers' market volunteers may come from a variety of backgrounds. Master Gardeners and Master Food Volunteers are a natural fit for such a function, but drawing from demographics outside conventional Extension programs should not be overlooked. Local schools often have a service-learning requirement for students, making them a viable volunteer pool. Colleges often encourage organizations to set up booths during the first week of classes in August, and these can be an effective way to connect with volunteers. Look also at community food organizations that have an interest in a "locavore" culture.

The market's customer base may provide some of the strongest volunteer candidates, because these individuals are familiar with the vendors, their products, the market hours, and specific rules for items being sold. They're also found at the market, eliminating the need to go out and recruit from other locations.

Churches, synagogues, and other faith-based institutions may already be directly involved in food pantries and food drives. These organizations can offer insight into impediments to fresh food supply in the vicinity and can be vital to building relevant connections between farmers' markets and those in need in the community (Feenstra, 1997).

In recruiting farmers' market volunteers, it's imperative to use detailed position descriptions so that potential participants will know their specific duties and the time requirements thereof. Meier (2008) identified popular positions filled by farmers' market volunteers:

- Greeter/public relations

- Graphic designer
- Writer
- Information booth staff
- Music organizer
- EBT coordinator
- Market photographer

Prior to volunteers serving in their respective roles, there should be a formal orientation and relevant subject-matter training. The orientation should include information on the history of the market (and the sponsoring organization, if appropriate), goals, vendor demographics, and, perhaps, a background on the community foods movement. Subject matter-specific education could potentially address nutritional aspects of the products being sold, information on existing programs such as the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, home-processed food requirements, and market guidelines.

In addition to the involvement listed above, volunteers can be crucial in the collection of data that relates to consumer preferences, pricing, and vendor satisfaction. Customer questionnaires can be beneficial instruments for identifying market modifications that could increase patronage (Eastwood, 1996), and even volunteers who have never conducted a formal interview can become comfortable with the process with only a minimal level of education (Rogers & Burt, 1993).

## **Strategies for Making the Most of a Farmers' Market Volunteer Team**

Two strategies to increase the visibility of volunteers at a market are the establishment of a dedicated information booth and "uniforms" for the volunteer team. At the information booth, volunteer recruitment packs should be available to prospective volunteers. Volunteer packets reduce the time between an expression of interest by a potential volunteer and that individual's involvement; they give other volunteers a consistent, professional resource for sharing information on volunteer opportunities; and customizable to the specific situation or volunteer need (Culp et al., 2006).

T-shirts, hats, and/or badges for the volunteer can convey a sense of team membership and also make it easier for them to be identified by consumers and growers.

Recognition during or at the conclusion of the market season should highlight the volunteers' success and their contributions to the farmers' market. For example, an end-of-season cookout is an effective way to thank the volunteer team while simultaneously celebrating the local foods they support.

While paid market managers operate differently than do volunteers, it's quite possible for many of the

traditional duties of a paid farmers' market manager to be absorbed by a dedicated and educated team of farmers' market volunteers. The key is an organized and well-orchestrated approach to the effective use of volunteers' talents and interests, and this type of approach will guarantee a volunteer effort that grows and returns year after year.

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