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## The Grower's Roundtable: Encouraging Conversations About Critical Farmers' Market Management Issues

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PREVIOUS  
ARTICLE



ISSUE  
CONTENTS



NEXT  
ARTICLE



## The Growers' Roundtable: Encouraging Conversations About Critical Farmers' Market Management Issues

### Abstract

The Growers' Roundtable Meeting provides a forum for open and productive conversations of difficult topics in farmers' market management. Because these ad-hoc groups do not take decisions, participants are free to listen and interact with the intent of learning from each other. The useful ideas that are generated during the meeting will subsequently reappear in many different settings. In a more general sense, getting the right people together to focus on important topics with appropriate conversational rules results in an excellent recipe for success.

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## Introduction

While farmers markets have grown impressively in the last decade, most face complex and controversial management challenges. The organization and management structure of the market often makes it difficult to discuss and address these key issues. For example:

- Within every market, each vendor must both cooperate and compete with other vendors.
- Growers (market vendors) have little time to serve on market boards, especially during the production and market season. Because many growers participate in more than one market, the attention that they can give any single market is further limited.
- Although market managers are dedicated and hard working, they are often poorly compensated and inadequately trained.

Oregon State University and the Oregon Farmers Market Association (OFMA) have developed a Growers' Roundtable Meeting (GRM) format that provides an opportunity for open and productive conversations concerning difficult topics and occurs completely outside of the individual market board. These specially convened sessions provide all GRM participants with new insights and information that can be fed back into their own market board meetings and discussions.

Our instructions to participants state:

No decisions will be made today as no one here has the authority to do so. Please relax

and listen carefully to what others have to say. **These discussions can and will have an impact.** Many participants last year said they left with a better understanding of, and appreciation for, the diverse opinions surrounding these difficult issues. The notes taken today will be sent to everyone present and all OFMA members. Last year's notes were used by several market groups to introduce and evaluate key issues they faced. Rest assured that **good ideas will not die!**

## Steps for a Productive Meeting

**Step 1: Identify a set of important questions.** We suggest six to eight, depending on the size of the group. Good questions are tough to answer and/or elicit divergent opinions. We provide examples of some of the questions we have used in the next section.

**Step 2: Invite growers and market managers to participate.** Although both groups are stakeholders in the market, we view their roles in the roundtable as quite different. Because of the existence of OFMA, market managers can discuss market issues with others statewide, both in person and by e-mail. Because growers lack such a statewide organization, the roundtable gives them a unique opportunity to communicate with others. Growers are expected to both speak and listen. Managers are invited to listen and record, and given fewer opportunities to speak.

**Step 3: Design your meeting according to the number of participants, goals, and time allocated.** Our format works well for 27 to 36 participants and a 2.5-hour meeting, including breaks. Other group sizes can work with appropriate modifications.

We have found dividing into three discussion groups most effective. Our target attendance is 15 to 24 vendors and around 12 market managers. Broken into three groups, this puts five to eight vendors and about four managers in each, with one manager serving as group facilitator and another as recorder.

Each discussion group is assigned two questions and given an hour to discuss them. We find that, in this size of group, each participant has ample opportunity to share his or her views. Managers and other non-vendors are allowed to speak only during the last 5 minutes of discussion for each issue.

The tightly focused half-hour discussions are very productive. Because everyone understands that no decisions will be made, differences of opinion emerge without the hostility found in decision-making meetings. Participants focus on learning from each other rather than on supporting a specific position. Strict time limits keep everyone on task and moving forward.

After an hour of discussion and a break, each group has 15 minutes to report the highlights of its discussions and accept comments and questions from the broader group. While these reports sometimes elicit strong reactions, we find them quite valuable. The larger group provides not only useful feedback, but also new ideas. The total time allotted for these reports is 45 minutes.

After the meeting, a full set of notes is sent to all participants and other interested parties. Although no decisions are made or votes taken, much progress is achieved. When important topics are put on the table, good ideas flow and are subsequently adopted in many markets.

Participants left our meetings energized and excited about sharing what they had learned. They were eager to return and do it again.

## Examples of Questions

Below are some of the questions discussed at our roundtables, plus sample notes on one. More information about our approach, as well as complete meeting notes, can be obtained from the authors.

1. Should there be geographical restrictions for growers permitted to sell at metro Portland markets?
  - The consensus was that the geographical region should be larger than the Portland metro area, but there was no agreement on how much larger.
  - Participants agreed that the geographical region should be left to each market to decide.
  - Once market rules are established, they must be clearly explained and enforced.
  - Local vendors should have preference.
  - Markets must focus on what they are doing for their customers by adding to the product mix, availability, and quality and not focus solely on geographic origin.
  - The vitality of a market depends upon the quality, quantity, and variety of products. It's more important that the market is bountiful, than to require 100% of product be grown by the vendor, especially when that product (e.g., melons or cherries) is available in eastern Oregon

but not in the metro area. Better to include *quality* eastern Oregon growers to enhance the overall quality of the market. All vendors will prosper if the reputation for quality and abundance increases the popularity of the market.

2. Every market has a grower percentage rule. How should this be enforced? Should it be done on a weekly or seasonal basis?
3. How does the mix of full-time and part-time growers change a market's dynamics?
4. What can/should local and state governments do to better support farmers' markets? What can vendors and markets do to gain their support?
5. In Oregon, market-board membership ranges from all farmers to all community members. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each and offer suggestions on getting more participation by either growers or community members.

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