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Abstract
The study reported here provides an overview of attitudes, preferences, and characteristics of consumers who shop at farmers' markets. The results, based on a consumer survey of 336 patrons of New Jersey farmers' markets, revealed that absence of a market in customers' vicinity, lack of knowledge, and inconvenience in terms of time and location were the main reasons for not patronizing these markets. On average, consumers spent $16 per visit, and the majority had attended between two to four different farmers' markets. The majority visited these facilities once a week, once every 2 weeks, or once a month.

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Introduction

Farmers' markets are offering producers a unique opportunity to obtain better profit margins by selling agricultural produce directly to the consumer, despite increasing production costs.

Relatively small farm sizes and direct contact with the consumers allow New Jersey farmers to quickly adjust production and capitalize on new market niches before mass manufacturers can exploit them (Sommer, 1985). Increased consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables over the years resulting from better nutritional content, good taste, and flavor has also contributed to the proliferation and success of farmers' markets (Brooker, 1993). Previous surveys indicate that consumers patronize farmers' markets primarily for the high quality of fresh produce and competitive prices (Sommer et al, 1984).

What produce farmers bring to the market place is also affected by changes in the makeup of the consumer population, lifestyles, incomes, and convenience of consumers. In addition, demographic factors such as household size, age, and distribution of the population can alter consumption trends (USDA, SB-928).

Accurate information on consumer trends is vital for the economic viability of farmers' markets. The study reported here provides an overview of attitudes, preferences, and characteristics of consumers who shop at farmers' markets. The insights provided by this project are expected to help producers and managers of farmers' markets allocate their resources more efficiently to better meet consumer needs. Moreover, patrons' demographic and socioeconomic characteristics could aid marketers in the identification of potential target markets.

Survey Design and Procedures

A survey of New Jersey farmers' market patrons was conducted from July through September, 1997 to gather information about consumers' attributes, preferences, and socioeconomic characteristics. Five hundred surveys were distributed at 21 farmers' markets operating in Northern and Central New Jersey. The locality of markets ensured that the participants represented a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Of the 500 surveys distributed, 344 were returned. However, eight of those were not included in the analysis due to unanswered questions. The number of usable surveys was 336, with an overall response rate of 67%.

Survey Results

Consumption Trends of Fresh Produce

Approximately 75% of the respondents indicated that they had increased their intake of fresh fruits over the past 5 years. While consumption remained constant for 23% of the participants, about 2% decreased their consumption of fresh fruits. Furthermore, almost 80% of the respondents had increased the variety of fresh fruits they presently purchased when compared to 5 years earlier.

In the case of vegetables, approximately 78% of the respondents consumed a greater quantity than 5 years earlier. While 20% showed no change, only 2% had decreased their consumption. Approximately 81% purchased a wider variety of the fresh vegetables compared to 5 years earlier.

Organic produce was included in the survey due to the growing concern with food safety and the environment. Approximately 12% of the respondents had never purchased organic items. The majority of participants (66%) indicated they seldom chose organic produce when shopping; 18% usually purchased organic produce; and 4 % always chose organic produce.

The average dollar amount spent per visit at a farmers' market ranged from $3 to $125, with a mean value of $16 and the majority attended between two to four different farmers markets in 1996.

The overwhelming majority (98.5%) expect higher quality produce from farmers' markets compared to that at other retail facilities. The remaining 1.5% of participants anticipated quality to be the same. While 56% of the participants expected a wider variety of fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets, 30% anticipated no significant difference, and 16% expected less variety than at other retail facilities. The majority of the survey respondents (56%) believed prices to be lower at farmers' markets; 25% did not expect any difference; and 21% anticipated higher prices than at other retail facilities.

Place and Amount of Purchase

Few participants (1%) purchased all their household fruits and vegetables from direct marketing outlets. Most of the respondents (more than 92%) had purchased at least some produce from farmers' markets. A high number of consumers (33%) had purchased more produce from the direct farm markets than from pick-your-own facilities (22%). Direct farm markets are defined as permanent market outlets at the farm, whereas, roadside stands are temporary outlets for the season. The survey also shows that nearly 68% at least occasionally purchase produce from roadside stands (Table 1).

Table 1.
Where and in What Amounts Consumers Purchased or Obtained Fruits and Vegetables During the 1996 Season (in percent)

	All	**Most**	**Some**	**None**
Farmers' Market	1.2	24.5	66.7	7.6
Pick Your Own	0.3	1.2	21.0	77.5
Roadside stands	0.3	6.4	60.8	32.5
Direct Farm Market	0.3	6.4	26.7	66.6
Supermarket	1.2	57.0	39.1	2.7

Consumer Preferences of Products

The fruits most frequently purchased at farmers' markets included peaches, apples, melons, and blueberries (each had been purchased by at least 61% of respondents). Over 33% of the participants had purchased strawberries and watermelon. Less than 4% of the respondents preferred plums, nectarines, grapes, pears, apricots, and cantaloupe.

Of the vegetables purchased, more than 61% of the respondents preferred sweet corn, tomatoes, and peppers. While 33% preferred snap beans, broccoli, and carrots, less than 8% preferred lettuce, squash, cucumbers, zucchini, eggplant, potatoes, onions, arugula, herbs, Swiss chard, beets, kale, cabbage, green beans, pumpkins, okra, cauliflower, string beans, rhubarb, leeks, and radish. The least preferred vegetables were asparagus, yams, garlic, artichokes, peas, lima beans, scallions, turnips, collard greens, cilantro, and dandelion.

Value-added products can also be purchased at some farmers' markets. In terms of responses, baked goods (140 responses) and flowers (136 responses) were the most likely to be purchased by consumers, followed by jam, jelly, and preserves (98 responses), herbal products (80 responses), juices (72 responses) and dried fruits (60 responses). Other products mentioned included cheese, honey, eggs, plants, milk, pickles, walnuts, and seaweed. Although all respondents stated that they used the fresh fruits and vegetables purchased at farmers' markets for fresh consumption, other uses, such as freezing (27%), preserving (5%), canning (4%), drying (1%), jellies and jam (1%) and grilling (1%) were also reported by consumers.

Characteristics Affecting Where to Purchase Produce and Frequency of Patronage

Survey participants were asked to indicate which factor(s) among convenience, price, quality, and freshness played an important role in their decision on where to purchase. Quality and freshness were selected by 63% and 59% of the participants, respectively. Approximately 20% of the consumers valued convenience, while 16% indicated that price was the most important characteristic. Nearly 87% of the respondents indicated that availability and quality of fresh produce affected their decision on where to purchase. Furthermore, 80% also cared about the place of origin of the fresh produce they bought.

Among those who patronized farmers' markets, roughly 6% indicated that they shopped at these outlets twice a week, 44% once a week, and 21% shopped bi-weekly. While 24% attended farmers' markets once a month, 5% attended only once. Almost 46% of the respondents reported that they had increased the number of visits of farmers' markets in 1996 compared to the previous year. While 48% stayed the same, only 7% frequented markets less often in 1996 than in previous years.

Consumers' View on Farmers' Market:

Survey participants were asked to rate several farmers' market characteristics. Quality of product ranked very high, with 87% of the survey participants rating it as very good or excellent, 12% rating quality as good, and less than 1% rating it as fair. Approximately 50% of the respondents indicated the appearance of the facility, variety of products, cleanliness of facility, and parking to be very good or excellent. At least an additional 30% rated each of these factors as good. Only 16% rated these market characteristics as fair. Cleanliness of the facility was rated as excellent or good by 94%. Nearly 70% of the respondents indicated that the convenience of location and employee attitude was very good or excellent, with an additional 25% of the participants perceiving it as good.

Price was the characteristic that scored the lowest. Only 36% perceived prices to be excellent or very good, while the majority (47%) thought that prices at farmers' markets were good. However, 17% of the respondents indicated that prices were fair (Table 2).

Table 2.
Rating of Farmers' Markets Characteristics (in percent)

Characteristics	Excellent or Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
Quality of products	87.3	12.1	0.6	0
Appearance of facility	49.2	37.6	12.6	0.6
Convenience of location	68.0	22.3	9.1	0.6
Employee attitude	72.9	25.0	2.1	0
Variety of products	52.0	35.3	11.2	1.5
Cleanliness of facility	52.8	41.4	5.8	0
Parking	52.3	28.3	16.0	3.4

Prices	36.0	46.5	16.6	0.9

Consumers were asked how they became aware of the farmers' markets they patronized. Participants selected as many forms of promotion associated with farmers' markets as they had encountered. Of the 336 respondents, roadside signs were cited by 50%, followed by newspapers, passing by, word of mouth, flyers, and others (Table 3). As can be seen from the table, the percentages do not add up to 100 because each respondent had more than one option to choose from as to how consumers find out about the farmers markets.

Table 3.
How Consumers Found Out About the Farmers Markets They Attend

Sources	**Percentage**
Roadside Signs	50%
Newspapers	49%
Passing by	49%
Word of mouth	42%
Flyers	15%
Magazines	1%
Television	%
Radio	1%
Internet	0.3%

Nearly 90% of the participants agreed that freshness and direct contact with farmers were the main factors that drive people to farmers' markets, while 10% disagreed with this statement. Similarly, 90% believed that farmers' markets helped to support local agriculture, while 9% were neutral and 1% disagreed. Approximately 68% of the respondents agreed that farmers' markets improved the local economy, while 26% were neutral and 6% disagreed. Nearly all respondent indicated that they intended to visit farmers' markets in the future.

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents:

The majority of respondents were at least 51 years old. The 51-65 age group was the second largest, followed by those who were 65 years or older. Approximately 83% of the participants were female. The average household size of those responding was 2.72 individuals. The average respondent had at least graduated from college (62%). Nearly 84% of the respondents were Caucasian, while the remaining 16% were African Americans, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific islander, or American Indian.

The annual household income of 5% of the survey participants was less than $20,000; 16% had an income of $20,000-$39,999; 24% had an income of $40,000-$59,999; and 19% had an income of $60,000-$79,999. While 9% had a household income of $80,000-$99,999, 27% made $100,000 or more. The type of neighborhood in which the participants lived was considered suburban by 83% of the respondents, urban by 14%, and rural by only 3% of the respondents.

Summary and Conclusions

Direct marketing of agricultural products allows consumers to purchase competitively priced, high-quality fresh produce, while farmers view direct marketing as an alternative way to capture more of the consumers' dollar. A survey of direct marketing consumers was conducted in 1997 to document their trends, preferences, and characteristics. Overall, consumers had increased the quantity and variety of fresh fruits and vegetables consumed compared to 5 years earlier. The typical consumer spent $16 per visit, and the majority attended between two to four different farmers' markets in 1996.

On average, consumers ranked quality of products and employee attitude as very good, while appearance of facility, convenience of location, variety of products, cleanliness of facility, parking, and prices received an average rating of good to very good. Parking and prices were the characteristics with the lowest scores. Furthermore, nearly all respondents intended to visit farmers' markets in the future. In general, consumers tended to agree that freshness and direct contact with farmers were the main factors that drove people to farmers' markets. One important finding is that 98.5% of consumers expected higher quality of produce at farmers' markets compared to that at other retail facilities.

Knowledge of consumers' preferences and expectations allow growers to plan production, pricing, and marketing strategies more efficiently. For example, freshness and quality of farmers' market produce should be mentioned in every promotional tool because these were identified by survey participants as the most critical factors for deciding where to shop. Additionally, the identification of potential target markets based on socioeconomic and demographic characteristics could also aid managers and organizers of farmers' markets when searching for strategic locations to set up these outlets.

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