

## ***The A's Have It— Tips on selling at farmers markets***

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You've worked hard all season. You're growing the greatest crops; making the finest and tastiest breads, jams, salsas; you fashion quality, interesting products. You're a Producer!

The skills it takes to be an efficient, happy producer, however, are not the same as those of a successful, happy vendor. Market gardeners, fruit vendors, processors, and crafters must weekly (or more frequently) 'morph' into consummate vendors if they are to optimize the rewards their labor has earned them.

Walking through most Farmers Markets, you will see that the 'morphing' is not always successful. Half-filled boxes, bruised and second-rate produce, carelessly arranged wares, uninviting display, bored (or absent) vendors—these stalls are worthy of a glance and an easy decision to move on. It's time those vendors went for the A's that successful vendors have learned.

### **A is for Appearance**

The first (and probably only) impression that market customers will have is the overall look of your stall. For them, that impression will define you and what you are selling. How quickly can you tell them what they need to know in order to choose your products over those in the next inviting stall?

First, your sign can tell them a lot. An attractive sign lets them know you're serious. It should tell them who you are, where you're from, what you do and what you offer. Are you 'organic,' 'freshest,' 'original,' 'home-made'? The sign should be neat, colorful and large enough to be seen above your display. It will make your customers feel that they know you, enable them (as well as the market manager, other vendors and friends) to direct people to you. It gives you an instant identity. This identity can be further amplified with neat, embroidered t-shirts, aprons, name-tags and the like, with the farm name on price cards and hand-outs. It's the least expensive (and often the most effective) advertising you can do.

That first impression is also affected by your display. Customers need to know immediately what marvelous things you have brought for them. You can show them by being conscious of the 5 C's: Color, Contrasts, Convenience, Clarity and Cleanliness.

**Color** attracts. If what you're selling isn't colorful, make it so with table covers, cloths lining baskets holding products, flowers interspersed amidst the veggies, colorful signage—always being careful that the color makes what you're selling stand out and does not overwhelm it.

**Contrasting** colors and textures attract attention as well. Make checkerboards, rows of contrasting products, dark next to light, rough next to smooth, vertical next to horizontal. Avoid 'busy-ness'. Make the contrasting areas large enough to give a sense of mass.

**Convenience** is more important in our 'instant-everything' culture than it has ever been. It will pay to make things as easy for customers as you can. First, they have to be able to approach

your stall, reach anything you've displayed without undue stretching, have a bit of space to put down what they're carrying while they choose your offerings. (Otherwise they'll set it down on your display causing crushing, or simply find it all too complicated and walk on.) They need to be able to approach your sales area without pushing, shoving or being crowded. In a typical market stall, this required some planning! A shallow 'U' or 'V' or the ubiquitous long table can accomplish this.

Be aware of the vertical potential of your stall. Either a tiered display (especially suitable for small crafts and value-added products) or stacked boxes forming bookcase-like sections let you put more in the same space. And don't forget the 'canopy as hanging line' gambit. Hang herbs, peppers, trinkets, bird houses, etc. from the canopy or from a frame you have constructed for that purpose. Lattice can be used effectively to display vertically as well.

Be aware of the angle from which the customer is seeing your display and angle your containers (as much as 45 degrees!) so that they are looking directly at them. For smaller quantities, lay baskets on their sides with the product 'spilling' out of them.

Be sure that purchasing is convenient, too. If you are selling bulk produce, be sure bags are handy (even handing them personally to customers). Even more convenient are pre-measured bags, baskets, cartons sold 'by the each,' which eliminates the need for time-consuming weighing and mathematical gymnastics. Having different sized containers—1#, 5# and 10# bags of, say, potatoes takes into consideration the differing needs of customers. Bagging by price is also innovative: has anyone tried selling \$2 bags of fresh produce for WIC recipients?

**Clarity** will not draw customers to you. but the lack of it will certainly turn them away. It is important that they know WHAT they're buying and for HOW MUCH. Whether by a large price sign (blackboard, whiteboard, posterboard) or by small signs assigned to each product, you need to let them know this much at least. If you can give them additional information—the variety, what's special about it, ways to use it—you will both draw attention to it and give the customer additional value. A descriptive word or two, if true, never hurts. (Check the supermarket ads for effective ones—they paid a lot of money for that information! You, of course can add 'fresh this morning,' 'grown without poisons,' and the like to your cards). Be clear whether the price is per pound, for each bunch, head, jar, whatever.

**Cleanliness** above and beyond the health department and market requirements is more important today than ever as our customers become concerned with food-borne illnesses played out in the evening papers. Have a trash container where customers can use it as well as the one where you sort product. Keep up with your display and selling area. Blemished, rotting or moldy fruit and veggies will turn off your sales in a second. Fallen produce attracts insects and makes a dirty and sloppy-looking stall. Present a clean and wholesome appearance yourself As people become more concerned about the purity of their food, more will come to the market to avoid the worries of permissible foreign pesticide use; they want to know how their food is grown, what they are putting into their mouths. That's one of the primary reasons they come to the market. Let's keep it that way.

### **A is for Appropriate**

Remember that different products beg for different treatment. Making your presentation reflect the type of product you're selling will increase your sales. Fancy vinegars, gift items, sun-dried tomatoes and the like can demand a premium if they are set off in a special, up-scale way Tiered display with a bit of understatement, a baker's rack, a more-subtle fabric may set them off to advantage. Honey should be displayed where the light can show through. Produce is well displayed in baskets and lugs large and small. The back of a pick-up works well for large quantities of the same produce, sending the message: "Straight from the Fields to You!"

For most products, a great deal of the appeal is visual. Don't hide them! If you prepackage in such a way that the product is hard to see, set out an example of, say, a loaf of bread (on a board), a bag of salad mix (in a bowl).

Look at your display and try to determine what message you're sending. Who will it appeal to? Is

that the customer you're after?

### **A is for Abundance**

What is a Farmers Market but the manifestation of local food abundance? Its symbol is often a cornucopia or the overflowing market basket. The expectation of customers, then, is that they will see lots of whatever there is to buy. They want to have choice, both of where they buy and of what they buy so that they can make their selection according to their own criteria. That's one reason that the large stalls with mounds and boxes of produce have lines and crowds around them; the card tables with a dab of this and that seldom do. The saying goes, "The more you bring, the more you'll sell," and it proves out. The impression of abundance attracts. And don't forget the 21st Century Supermarket. Customers have been trained to expect 'blocks' of everything and infinite variety. The Farmers Market certainly won't (and couldn't) compete with the variety and prices that the supermarket offers. But it must offer choice and the abundance of its region.

So what's a small grower to do? Don't pile, spread. Use a smaller table, but make it crowded with product. Maintain the display containers in a full rather than a 'picked-over' look, transferring from larger to smaller containers as you sell down. Better yet, grow more stuff!

### **A is for Attitude**

One of the greatest attractions of the local Farmers Markets is the opportunity to 'meet the grower, the maker, the baker'—to make a connection with the reality of food. (It doesn't come from the back room of supermarkets and semi trucks, nor is it replicated in vast warehouses.) Folks often want to know what it takes to grow a beet, ask the farmer why their broccoli doesn't look like his, reminisce about vacationing on grandpa's farm (or is it great-grandpa's now?). They feel a need to reconnect with the land, and the Farmers Market is on the front-line. They want a connection with you as well. The Market is one of the few places left where folks can meet and 'hang out' as they go about their lives. It provides a place of community, of people coming together, reminiscent of the backyards and town squares of yesteryear.

Vendors *must* be friendly people, who want to share a bit of themselves, of what they do and how they do it—maybe even why they do it. Enthusiasm and optimism must be evident. Bemoaning the state of agriculture and the small farmer today with a sad and bitter mien will not bring customers to your stall (though a cheerful and thoughtful discussion of these issues couldn't hurt). Ignoring customers while chatting with friends and other vendors; reading a magazine or newspaper, not attending the stall, grouchiness, argumentativeness, annoyance—all cause customers to avoid your stall on their next visit. Best Advice: leave problems, moods and worries at home. You are at the market for your customers. Give them your attention and a bit of yourself.

So... are you an 'A' staller? Not only a great producer but a market success as well? Follow these principles and it will surely be so.