



# Plan, Partner, and Promote:

Best Marketing Practices from Wisconsin's  
Farmers Market Managers

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## Note to Readers

The following guide shares Wisconsin farmers market managers' best practices in promoting and marketing their farmers markets. Whether you are a farmers market manager or a community supporter of farmers markets, we hope this guide will spark new ideas and strategies to help you better sustain your farmers market operations.

The best practices shared in this guide come from research that was conducted as a part of *Identifying Farmers Market Manager Communication Needs*, a project to better understand farmers market managers' data collection and promotion practices. In fall 2016, we secured UW-Madison Institutional Review Board approval for a series of 17 interviews with Wisconsin farmers market managers. We interviewed farmers market managers based in rural, suburban, small city, and large metropolitan areas. Both new and experienced market managers were involved in the study. The individuals who are quoted in this report have graciously provided their permission to be featured.

This guide is organized into four sections. [Producing a Plan](#) covers market managers' suggestions for developing a promotional plan and setting goals. Next, [Partnering on Promotion](#) shares how market managers have successfully collaborated with different groups to implement their marketing plans. [Putting Plans into Action](#) then illustrates creative approaches that managers have used to conduct outreach about their markets, broken down by specific marketing methods. The final section, [Evaluating the Impact](#), emphasizes the importance of measuring and analyzing the success of your marketing plans.

As more outlets for locally grown food become available, market managers face an increasingly competitive landscape that makes savvy marketing and promotion particularly important. By cross-pollinating ideas between market managers, we hope this guide helps to grow the resiliency of farmers markets in communities across Wisconsin and beyond.



We interviewed farmers market managers from towns and cities across the state of Wisconsin.

## Introduction

Farmers markets provide many benefits for communities both large and small. Among the positive social impacts, markets offer a physical location for people to connect with their neighbors, access farm-fresh foods, and learn more about how food is grown. Farmers markets also help generate economic activity at local businesses nearby and often attract tourists looking for a special “taste of place.” Perhaps most importantly, farmers markets provide an opportunity for small and medium-sized farms to reach consumers directly and retain a larger share of profit from their products’ sales. Direct feedback from customers can also help encourage more sustainable agricultural production practices on farms.

From 2006 to 2016, farmers markets in the U.S. doubled from 4,385 to more than 8,669 (USDA 2016). Wisconsin has shared in this growth: as of June 2017, the Wisconsin Farmers Market Association estimated that 265 markets were in operation across the state. As the local food trend has become more mainstream, conventional grocery stores and other food outlets have started to offer more local and organic options as well.

Given the growing competition, farmers market managers are posed with many challenges to sustaining their markets for the continued benefit of farmers and communities. Robust marketing and promotion strategies are essential for managers to attract and retain more vendors and customers.

In 2016, University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers interviewed 17 farmers market managers from across Wisconsin to learn more about their marketing and promotional efforts. The following guide features outreach strategies that market managers feel are most effective in growing and sustaining their markets. Their advice on planning, partnering, implementing, and evaluating promotional efforts are intended to help support your own strategies for farmers market promotion.





## Producing a Plan

Before you launch promotional efforts, managers recommend identifying who such efforts should target and then researching the most effective ways to communicate with those customers. Defining the ideal audiences for farmers market promotion allows you to spend your limited marketing budget most efficiently. Implementing an effective outreach campaign hinges on this strategic planning phase.

Depending on your market's organizational structure, different stakeholders are involved in determining who should be included in the target customer demographics. If the farmers market has an executive board or a marketing committee, the manager often works with these entities to shape the campaign's focus, define what success looks like, and choose specific campaign evaluation indicators (e.g. customer attendance or vendor sales). Managers also receive feedback directly from market vendors on how they would like to see their market business grow, who they believe their most valued customers are, and what kinds of products these customers typically purchase.



Photo Credit: USDA Agricultural Marketing Service

### What is a dot survey?

A dot survey asks customers to answer a multiple-choice question using stickers to select their answer. The survey is usually displayed on a flip chart or butcher paper at a market's entrance or other well-traveled location. Customers are given stickers by a volunteer as they walk by. Organizing a dot survey can help you learn more about your customer base.

Canvassing marketgoers can also provide you with important insights about your audiences. Managers have used "dot surveys" (see inset) or short questionnaires to learn how customers first heard about the market, how frequently they shop at the market, and how far away they live from the market. As Appleton Farm Market Manager Djuanna Hugdahl says, "We did a dot study at our indoor market, and it was just real simple: How did you hear about the market? We were surprised at how it was mostly word of mouth, or people were just aware of it, or Facebook. So, we decided to change our focus." By soliciting feedback from existing marketgoers, you can better tailor your marketing efforts to reach a larger number of potential customers.

A note that if you decide to implement exploratory data collection strategies like dot surveys, you should augment them with other sustained and ongoing data collection activities that will help you benchmark your marketing impacts. See the [Evaluating the Impact](#) section for examples of ongoing data collection strategies.

Beyond collecting information firsthand from market stakeholders, there is a growing body of research investigating why people buy local food. For example, a 2016 University of Wisconsin-Extension study examined consumer attitudes about locally grown food around Wisconsin. The study found that the main reasons consumers report buying local food include their desire to support farmers in their community and their perception that local food is superior in freshness and taste (Witzling, Shaw and Trechter, 2016). The report also found that consumers were more likely to purchase locally grown items if messaging reinforced that members of their social group also bought locally grown food. As a farmers market manager, you may benefit from reading about these insights and adopting the approaches that seem most relevant to your market size, location, and target audiences. See the “Learn More” section for select readings on local food marketing research.





## Partnering on Promotion

In addition to conducting background research on your market's target customers, farmers market managers also emphasize the importance of mapping out the landscape of support available in your community. Due to limited time and financial resources, managers recognize that partnerships with market stakeholders are critical to leveraging the resources necessary for effective outreach. These partnerships can be both internal, with your market's vendors, and external, with local government entities, Extension educators, colleges, businesses, tourism bureaus, healthcare providers, and community organizations.

### **Collaboration with Vendors:** Vendors can serve as strong allies in your promotional efforts.

Perhaps the most fundamental way vendors can contribute to marketing is by sharing their background for your market's website and social media posts. "Telling their story, it makes such a big difference," says Cynthia Holt, manager of the Fort Atkinson Farmers Market. "We worked for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary really hard to get every vendor to tell their story. We at least tried to highlight one of them each week and highlight them in the newspaper, if not physically at the market. That certainly is the draw."

**"Telling their story, it makes such a big difference,"**

– Cynthia Holt, manager of the Fort Atkinson Farmers Market

Farmers market managers also say that a vendor's booth design (in addition to the overall market stall design) is very important for promoting the farmers market brand. Vendors who creatively organize their products and use clear, well-designed signage help farmers markets boost their profile and attract more customers. Beyond booth design, your market's brand also relies on vendors who are well versed in customer service and can easily build trust and rapport with marketgoers.

Not all vendors are necessarily skilled in sales and promotion. Some managers have struggled to encourage vendors to implement marketing strategies at their booths. To more actively support vendors with marketing and promotion, managers have taken time at their annual vendor meetings to go over best practices for stand design and customer interaction. Managers have also developed uniform signage that vendors can use to communicate their type of operation and growing practices. In Fort Atkinson, manager Cynthia Holt has even subsidized the cost of colorful aprons for vendors to wear while at their booths. For the market's upcoming 15th Anniversary, she will be sharing a new batch of aprons that feature the market's logo.

Many vendors have also been willing to participate in market-wide giveaways, where each vendor contributes an item for a special prize drawing. Lois Federman, the former co-manager of the Mineral Point Farmers Market, reports that this can also be a great way to introduce customers to new products or to move excess perishable produce. "We have a customer appreciation gift basket drawing, we call it our 'Market Basket', about once a month," she says. "That's been an extremely popular event. It's good PR, and it's a good way to get customers to try products that you might be introducing, or something that maybe goes down a little bit in sales, or you have extra inventory on." This



practice has also been the market's best source of gathering names for its online newsletter, which Federman believes is its most effective form of marketing.

### **Collaboration with the Community:**

Managers have also found promotional support from local community stakeholders who can mutually benefit from the market's success. While a market may not have the adequate financial resources or staff to implement a robust promotional campaign, one of the farmers market's biggest assets is its customer base. Former market manager for La Crosse's Cameron Park Farmers Market, Nell Saunders-Scott says, "What we do have that we can offer to partners is somewhat of a captive audience. *Captive* is probably too strong a word, but an audience of people walking through a space at a given time each week."

With this unique value proposition, market managers can build strategic partnerships to help finance promotional efforts and grow customer attendance in the process. This may involve local businesses, healthcare providers, neighborhood associations, a municipality's parks and recreation department, nearby colleges, farm-to-table restaurants, or aligned nonprofit groups related to hunger and community food systems.

One example of a successful partnership is the DeForest Area Farmers Market's relationship with a local credit union. The credit union helped the market purchase EBT/credit card machines as well as advertise more widely throughout the community. In exchange for its sponsorship, DeForest Area Farmers Market's director Joleen Stinson mentions the credit union in social media posts and allows it to distribute free, branded canvas shopping bags at the farmers market every week.

Additional examples of how you can leverage partnerships for effective marketing are detailed in the following section.



Screenshot of a social media post displaying the DeForest Area Farmers Market's tote bags, which are sponsored by a local credit union.

## Putting Plans into Action

With the support of market stakeholders, managers utilize many traditional and new media channels to reach their communities and grow their market attendance. Even with supportive partners, though, managers must still balance their promotional aspirations with the reality of limited time and money. To deal with these capacity issues, farmers market managers often think outside of the box. As one market manager quips, “My old adage is that if you do not have much money, you need better ideas.” This section features the most commonly used channels for market promotion and how managers have creatively approached outreach efforts to spread their dollars more effectively.

**Word of Mouth:** Market managers note that a lot of the foot traffic that farmers markets receive is due to word of mouth, or new customers learning about the market through friends, relatives, colleagues, and other community contacts. To generate more buzz through word of mouth, market managers reach out to community organizations like nonprofits, churches, food pantries, schools, and local associations. Farmers markets will also send a representative to make announcements at organizational meetings and provide literature for groups to share with their members.

Often, managers will also invite community groups to set up a booth at the market for free or a reduced fee. This encourages organizations to both promote their appearance to constituents while also advertising the farmers market at large. Overall, market managers believe this strategy of “cross-promotion” works well for attracting new customers and generating buzz around the community. However, some managers question if the increase in customer attendance from cross-promotion translates to an increase in market sales. Just because more people are attending the market does not necessarily mean those people are buying



Photo Credit: Fort Atkinson Farmers Market

Representatives from the Jefferson County Health Department share nutritional information at the Fort Atkinson Farmers Market.



goods from vendors. Managers recommend carefully cultivating relationships with organizations that are more aligned with your market’s mission or whose membership will be more likely to purchase products while visiting the market.

**Social Media:** Most managers maintain a Facebook page for their farmers market to communicate with new customers, loyal regulars, and potential market volunteers. Robyn Thibado, Menomonie Farmers Market’s director, says, “Of all the things that we’ve tried—and we put posters up around town, and we have flyers, and brochures at the hotels—Facebook has been amazing in really drumming up interest.” A handful of markets have also explored other social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter, though managers have had mixed success with these other sites.

Market managers suggest that you schedule Facebook posts to make your social media presence easier to administer. This allows you to condense the time you spend creating content for Facebook to one or two days

**“More and more vendors are taking pictures once they get set up. We’ll see it on their Facebook Page—We’re here! or that sort of thing.”**

– Lois Federman, former manager of the Mineral Point Market

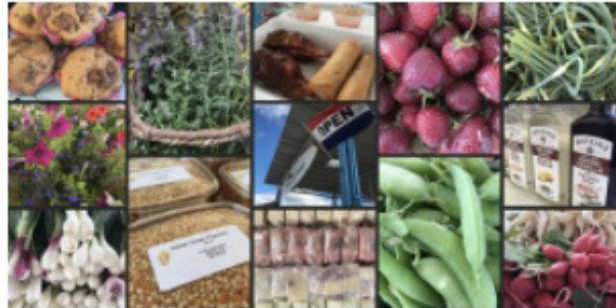
a week. For example, a manager might log into Facebook on Monday, share a post thanking one of their sponsors, and then schedule another two posts for later in the week. A post for Tuesday or Wednesday



Screenshot of a Dane County Farmers Market Day-Of Post

might feature a photo of the “Vendor of the Week” and what he or she will be bringing to the market that Saturday. The next scheduled post will come out on Thursday or Friday to remind customers about the upcoming market’s hours and location. For final encouragement, the manager then might log into Facebook to post a photo of the farmers market’s bounty on the day of the event.

To generate new material for social media, market managers crowdsource images and stories from their customers and vendors. “I see at our market that there are more and more people with smart-phones,” reports Lois Federman, Mineral Point’s former market manager. “More and more vendors are taking pictures once they get set up. We’ll see it on their Facebook Page—*We’re here!* or that sort of thing.” To that end, you should be sure to follow your vendors’ Facebook pages to capture and share posts about the market.



Summertime in Milwaukee can be magical – with free music in the parks, festivals each week, and long days to enjoy time with friends and families. **Not to mention summer produce at the farmers markets!** While tomatoes and peppers are a ways off yet, you'll start finding favorites at [Fondy Farmers Market](#) such as strawberries, sugar snap peas, radishes, scallions, salad greens, and cooking greens, for your picnics in the park, backyard cook-outs, or beachside snacking.

### Our Markets:

**Fondy Farmers Market**  
[www.fondymarket.org](http://www.fondymarket.org)  
 2200 W Fond du Lac Ave  
 Milwaukee WI 53206

June 17 - Oct 29  
 Saturday 7 AM - 3 PM  
 Sunday 9 AM - 3 PM  
 Tuesday 9 AM - 3 PM  
 Thursday 9 AM - 3 PM

Nov 4 - 18  
 Saturday 9 AM - 3 PM

**Fondy Market  
 at Schlitz Park**  
**OPENS July 11, 2017**  
 Tuesday 11 AM - 2 PM

Milwaukee's Fondy Farmers Market shares the "Fondy Beet" E-newsletter with subscribers every week during the market season.

Managers also encourage social media users to tag the market's Facebook page handle or use a market-specific hashtag. The Dane County Farmers Market, for example, encourages the use of #wisconsin-goodness when customers or vendors post on social media.

Social media activity can have additional benefits beyond attracting customers to your market. Managers have also effectively used Facebook pages to advertise to new vendors, link to volunteer sign-up forms, and promote crowdfunding campaigns. To reach a larger audience, market managers will proactively ask their community partners to share their posts, especially if they have a special upcoming

event or a time-sensitive request like a fundraising drive. Managers who have paid to "boost" posts or buy targeted Facebook advertisements generally find this to be a useful investment in reaching more community members, although it is difficult to quantify exactly how many customers attend a market as a result of these advertisements.

Certainly, managers recognize that social media cannot be the only way they reach customers, as not all target demographics may be active on Facebook or similar platforms. Still, managers cite the use of these platforms as a critical part of their larger marketing strategy.





Photo Credit: Mineral Point Market



(Left) Mineral Point Market's sign is displayed at the market's site during the full summer season. Above: a flyer for the Fort Atkinson Farmers Market, designed by Jeremy Pinc.

**Websites and E-Newsletters:**

Many managers find it worthwhile to maintain a more traditional

webpage for the farmers market to complement their social media presence. This site will often contain more detailed information about the market than what is featured on a Facebook page. In addition to basic details, market websites will host stories about the market's history, feature vendor profiles, detail market bylaws and policies, and provide downloadable forms for producers looking to become market vendors.

While only a few of the interviewed managers report sending E-newsletters, those who do believe it is one of the most effective ways to reach repeat customers. Managers will use a weekly E-newsletter to highlight in-season produce, feature a "vendor of the week," and advertise

special upcoming market events. You can also use the E-newsletter to send important updates if, for example, a vendor plans to take a vacation or a construction project will impact the market's layout. Services like MailChimp, Constant Contact, and Salsa can help managers with E-newsletter management, although these services charge a fee. If you are able to pool your funds with other market managers, you can keep separate email lists within one shared account to save money.

To grow E-newsletter subscriptions, market managers will advertise the service on their social media pages and bring a hardcopy sign-up sheet to the farmers market. Market managers may also give customers the opportunity to opt-in to the E-newsletter if they fill out a survey or enter a customer appreciation giveaway. Nearby businesses can also help you share the E-newsletter sign-up by advertising it to their employees or customers.

**Flyers and Signs:**

To reach customers from around the community, many market managers

disseminate flyers and posters to local stores, banks, coffee shops, schools, municipal buildings, and public neighborhood sign boards. When managers do not have

**While only a few of the interviewed managers report sending E-newsletters, those who do believe it is one of the most effective ways to reach repeat customers.**

in-house expertise in poster design or access to relevant layout software, they partner with local designers or college courses to create professional flyers. To keep printing costs down, managers have cultivated relationships with local print shops that will often print the flyers for free. When free printing is inaccessible, managers have worked with local businesses to sponsor the cost.

In addition to distributing flyers, managers have found that it helps to have signage permanently posted at the site of the farmers market. Outdoor signs remind passersby of your market's seasonal schedule and hours of operation. If you are unable to post a physical sign on-site, you may be able to partner with municipalities and businesses to post messages on nearby marquees or electronic message boards.

**Print Advertising:** While market managers report paying for advertisements in newspapers, they share a concern that these ads are not effective enough in reaching new customers relative to their cost. Alternately, managers find that “earned media,” or seeking out free publicity, can be a great way to promote markets without the advertising expense. To encourage earned media, managers will draft press releases and work with local reporters to highlight vendors or special market events. Often, small town papers are also willing to publish dynamic photos submitted from farmers market managers free of charge.

Aside from newspaper circulation, there are other forms of print media that managers have found useful for community outreach. These include community or neighborhood association event calendars and visitor and convention bureau guides, which

**“Twice a month, I get on the radio with the news guy and we do a five-minute interview about what’s coming up and how things are going. That’s part of their in-kind advertising that they do shout-outs and public service announcements.”**

— Karlene Leatherman, executive director of Oshkosh Farmers Markets

often provide free or reduced-price advertising space for farmers markets. Local lifestyle magazines geared toward women and families, holistic health, or “locavores” have also been used by managers for advertising, though some of these options can be costly. One publication that will feature Wisconsin farmers markets for no cost is the *Farm Fresh Atlas*, which distributes 200,000 print copies statewide every year.

**Television and Radio:** While advertising on radio or television can be more cost-prohibitive, market managers still report pursuing these channels for outreach.

Many radio stations air public service announcements free of charge, which can be a great way for you to advertise a SNAP/EBT or other food assistance program. As executive director of Oshkosh Farmers Markets, Karlene Leatherman says, “Twice a month, I get on the radio with the news guy and we do a five-minute interview about what’s coming up and how things are going. That’s part of their in-kind advertising that they do shout-outs and public service announcements.”



Market managers also report pooling their promotion dollars with other nearby farmers markets to pay for shared radio advertising space.

While most markets do not purchase advertising space on television, the Appleton Farm Market had an opportunity to “co-op” television space with vendors on a local television station. In this case, participating vendors paid for a percentage of the cost while the umbrella organization for the market, Appleton’s Downtown

Business Association, covered the remainder of the bill.

If you do not have the financial means to pay for television or radio airtime, there are still ways to take advantage of earned media opportunities. For example, market managers have successfully invited local television news programs and radio personalities to report live from their farmers market, which gives opportunities for customers and vendors to participate directly in promotional efforts.



Colorful and eye-catching displays like this one at the Dane County Farmers Market in Madison can help attract customers.

Photo Credit: Emily Mills, The Hottest Vendor, CC By-ND 2.0



## Evaluating the Impact

Having created a marketing strategy, developed promotion partnerships, and implemented marketing plans, farmers market managers recommend dedicating time to reflect on and evaluate your activities.

Evaluation may involve surveying your customers, reviewing the effectiveness of social media interactions, and scheduling time to solicit feedback from vendors and community partners. In addition, tracking customer attendance and vendor retention over time can indicate how well your market's outreach plan is working. If you are able to collaborate with vendors to gather sales information, this can also be used to understand the impact that your marketing plan has had on the market's success.

While it can be difficult to make time for data collection, reflection, and discussion, regularly scheduling these activities may ultimately help you increase the market's return on investment from marketing and promotion efforts. What's more, collecting this data can also help strengthen partnerships with businesses and community groups who want to see the quantitative impact that their contributions are having on the market. Sharing data with your market's sponsors and partners can encourage them to provide more resources in the future.

For assistance on collecting data, the *Tools for Rapid Market Assessments* from Oregon State University's Small Farm Program provides a good starting point for market managers. UW-Madison's *Metrics + Indicators for Impact* (MIFI) web portal also offers farmers markets assistance with collecting, analyzing, and reporting data. For local support on evaluation, managers have sought assistance from nearby colleges and universities, Extension offices, and county health departments.

Market managers recommend that you consider evaluation from the very beginning of your marketing strategy's development. As you embark on new plans or make changes to existing promotional efforts, you should seek to define what success looks like, and which specific indicators or benchmarks will let you know that your plan has succeeded. Success might mean a certain percentage increase in the number of visitors, a higher vendor retention rate, or stronger vendor sales. With the reflection process in mind from the outset, you will be better equipped to improve marketing strategies and sustain your market for the long-term.



## Learn More

Ready to take your farmers market marketing and promotions to the next level? Getting started can often feel overwhelming for a market manager with limited time or budget. It's important to start small and reach out to organizations like the Wisconsin Farmers Market Association or a local Extension educator for further assistance. The following resource suggestions may also help:

### “Marketing the Farmers Market” Powerpoint Presentation

Lynda Brushett, Cooperative Development Institute (2012)

<https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/Marketing%20the%20Farmers%20Market.pdf>

Slides cover how market managers can act on the four Ps of successful marketing: product, place, price, and promotion.

### Metrics + Indicators for Impact (MIFI)

University of Wisconsin-Madison's Center for Community and Nonprofit Studies (2017)

<https://mifimarkets.org/>

A web portal that offers managers support with collecting, analyzing, and sharing data about their farmers markets.

### New Directions in Marketing for Farmers' Markets

Kristin Krokowski and Terry Gaouette, *University of Wisconsin-Extension* (2009)

<https://learningstore.uwex.edu/Assets/pdfs/A3895.pdf>

This in-depth guide offers nine chapters that cover everything from developing a marketing strategy to how to collaborate with vendors, customers, and farmers market committees.

### Sell More! Farmers Market Vendor Booth Guide

Washington State University Small Farms Program (2014)

<http://farmersmarketcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/FM-Vendor-Marketing-Guide-June-2014-v1.pdf>

This guide is designed for vendors at farmers markets to improve their specialty crop sales.

### Tools for Rapid Market Assessments

Larry Lev, Linda Brewer, and Garry Stephenson, *Oregon State University's Small Farms Program* (2008)

[http://smallfarms.oregonstate.edu/sites/default/files/small-farms-tech-report/eesc\\_1088-e.pdf](http://smallfarms.oregonstate.edu/sites/default/files/small-farms-tech-report/eesc_1088-e.pdf)

An overview for market managers interested in conducting customer counts, administering dot surveys, and receiving constructive observations about their market.

### “Weeding the Social Media Garden” Webinar

Farmers Market Coalition (2012)

[https://youtu.be/j9zICOmX\\_7s](https://youtu.be/j9zICOmX_7s)

This webinar walks farmers market managers through maintaining different social media platforms and then assessing their impact.



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