

Best Practices for Alberta Approved Farmers' Markets

Introduction

Farmers' markets are one of the primary places where Albertans turn for local food. Market patrons enjoy having the ability to directly connect with the producers, processors and artisans, along with the opportunity to build an informed and trusting relationship.

In 2012, the [Alternative Agricultural Markets in Alberta study](#) found that the combined market value of farmers' markets and farm retail was approximately \$878 million. On average, farmers' market patrons spend \$55 per visit and \$671 over the course of a year. While the public acknowledges that farmers' markets are one of the best sources of local food, the opportunity for growth in farmers' markets is grounded in our ability to encourage patrons to visit more often and spend more money on each visit.

The [Alberta Approved Farmers' Market Program \(AAFMP\) Guidelines](#) set the conditions for markets to have official status as an Approved Farmers' Market in the province. This document is an opportunity to discover and share the practices that were implemented by market managers, governance bodies and vendors to make their approved farmers' markets a vibrant market channel for make, bake and grow (MBG) entrepreneurs to connect with their clients and the community.

This best practice summary was created through:

1. A review of the farmers' market best practices available on-line,
2. Interviews with market managers, who were selected using market size, location, focus and success, and
3. Market visits, which included conversations with market vendors.

Ten key areas were identified which, if implemented along with the AAFMP Guidelines, may lead to a vibrant market. These areas of focus include:

- Managing and leading the market
- Market governance
- Planning and strategy
- Location, environment and layout
- Vendor recruitment, selection and expectations
- Community engagement
- Market promotions
- Market activities and special events
- The vendor's role
- Evaluation and statistics

Managing and Leading the Market

The market manager plays the critical role of management, as well as leadership, for the market.

While there was not a firm consensus between the interview participants on the attributes of a great market manager, there was general agreement that managers need to have a passion for local food and the market. This passion must be shared with vendors and patrons. When it came to manager prerequisites, opinions ranged from the market manager needing food industry experience to connect with vendors to managers requiring no previous market experience, as managers are then not tied to historical approaches to market management.

At the Grassroots Farmers' Market in Calgary, the market manager is all about relationships and passion for community engagement and local food. To achieve a respectful environment, the manager treats all vendors fairly and works out conflicts quickly. To appreciate vendors, the market provides a low cost drink service to vendors and free hot drinks on cold days.

Additionally, market managers received a wide range of compensation for their contributions to the market. The larger, year-round markets tended to have a full-time, salaried market manager. In some cases, full-time managers had other work responsibilities in the broader market-sponsor organization. Smaller, seasonal markets tended to have a part-time market manager who received an honorarium or was a volunteer. The compensation of the market manager was often directly related to the vendor fees, with one manager choosing to receive no compensation to keep the cost of running the market low.

Overall, market managers felt they built positive, personal, and productive relationships with vendors by:

- *Taking time to communicate regularly with vendors.* This included sharing important information with vendors and seeking feedback. Managers used terms like “connecting”, “listening”, “being open”, “taking time” and “being visible” to describe their approach to communications. In addition to on-site, in-person communication, the market managers also used a combination of emails, social media, print newsletters, and websites to keep vendors informed.
- *Acting as a coach to their vendors.* In addition to a pervasive approach to communication, managers built relationships where they could provide feedback and make suggestions in a direct and honest manner. Additionally, managers took advantage of teachable moments, reinforced roles, supported conflict resolution between vendors and encouraged vendors to participate in the market community.
- *Treating vendors equally.* It is critical that managers follow clear guidelines and standards, as these rules allow for consistent and fair decisions when there are conflicts or disagreements. While the AAFMP Guidelines state that it is not preferred for the market manager to also be a vendor, the one manager who did this felt that the perception of a conflict of interest was mitigated through allowing vendors with similar products, treating everyone the same and sticking to the rules. When vendors were treated equally, there was a general feeling in the market that the manager is doing the best for everyone.

- *Treating vendors with respect and appreciation.* In addition to the behaviours listed above, managers also hosted vendor appreciation activities or events, used vendor products for market activities and events, spotlighted individual vendors, provided supplies like name tags, tents and promotional materials, and kept the market free of drama. As one market manager stated, “If the manager takes care of the vendors, the vendors will take care of the market clients.”

In addition to building relationships, successful managers made time to train and develop their own skills, along with their vendors and governance partners. Training is essential as it improved knowledge levels and educated individuals on market requirements, best practices, trends and opportunities. Training did not need to be formal and was as simple as visiting other markets to build networks with other managers, borrowing ideas and supporting other markets in their development.

The Seba Beach Farmers’ Market is all about supporting change. The market manager strives to be connected to the community and is not afraid to try new things. Successful changes have been implemented in the market through active engagement of vendors, having a plan, being honest and forthright and, most importantly, having a positive attitude. A life-long learning approach helps the manager stay on top of change.

Market managers were also willing to experiment with change and build on market success. When approaching changes, one market manager noted that changes to a market need to be incremental. Additionally, managers believed that there needs to be succession to ensure a smooth transition between the incoming and outgoing managers.

Overall, the market manager played a critical role of creating a positive environment that focused on promoting the people and products.

Market Governance

When it comes to market governance, a variety of models were implemented to support a vibrant market.

In the markets reviewed, the governance body membership included a combination of sponsor organization representatives, community/client representatives and vendor representatives. The make-up of the governance teams were influenced by the philosophy/direction of the market, with the reviewed market governance bodies focusing their membership on vendors or community members. While community members help to ground the market in client needs, vendor members helped to ensure that vendors had a voice in the decision making process.

The hosting of marketing meetings was also key to an engaging governance model, along with being a requirement if the market was the sponsor organization. Similar to the governance membership, there was no consensus on the right approach to an annual general meeting (AGM) and this was influenced by the market sponsor. Of interest, one market only allowed agriculture-based vendors to vote in the AGM, while another had an annual vendor/client meeting in place of an AGM, and a third used a process of ongoing communication and evaluation instead of an AGM. Whether or not the market hosts an AGM, it was vital that vendors and the community were engaged in the decision-making process for the market.

While markets were selective regarding some components of their governance model and process, not-for-profit organizations are required to meet legal requirements. As noted in the previous section, the best practice documents recognized the need for governance training to ensure that the individuals involved understand these roles and responsibilities.

The Hillhurst Sunnyside Farmers' Market has a clear, seven-point market manifesto that provides vision and direction for the market. This manifesto is tied to the community values and local food culture, which grounds the market's decision-making process. The commitment to the desires of the customer base is directly tied into, and helps to build, community spirit.

Planning and Strategy

One of the most important factors for a successful market was a strategic plan and clear direction. Some markets identified themselves as an educator, family outing or community hub. Others viewed themselves as a destination market that serves clients from a wider area or as a community market that focused on the residents in the area, where clients may be more focused on purchasing specific products. Overall, markets served the purpose of connecting local MBG entrepreneurs with clients.

While many of the managers noted the importance of having a strategic plan, only a few markets had an official market vision, direction statement (manifesto) or written plan. Market direction was often based on the mandate or direction of the sponsor organization and focused on MBG vendors and access to local food. Regardless of an informal or formal direction for the market, it was important that managers were able to communicate the philosophy or direction of the market to foster alignment between stakeholders.

While the 80% focus on MBG is a requirement for approved farmers' markets, the majority of managers focused on a higher ratio of MBG and aimed to have all products local and/or direct from the producer. Many stated that they were trying to limit or phase out resale/commercial vendors. This approach was illustrated by one market not allowing BC vendors to sell vegetables that are in-season in Alberta and another market allowing competition but setting vendor limits for certain vendor categories. When it came to competition between similar vendors, the magic number for healthy competition seemed to be two or three vendors, noting that the number depended on the size of the market. In general, most managers agreed that vendors in the same category need to be spaced throughout the entire market rather than grouped together.

The Evergreen Farmers' Market in Drayton Valley is all about "building bigger and building better" through an ongoing process of vendor and community engagement and networking with other markets. Through this approach, a market kids' club and innovative purchasing service for clients who are unable to attend during market hours have been implemented.

In addition to market direction and focus, taking a strategic approach to the market included fostering partnerships that help to further the success. Managers specifically noted working with government (Agriculture & Forestry and Alberta Health Services), facilities, industry associations (Alberta Farmers' Market Association and Alberta Farm Fresh Producers Association), community organizations and local media. Having strong partnerships resulted in effective market operations, coordinated promotions, learning and development opportunities and shared programming at the markets – along with benefits to vendors and the partner organizations.

Location, Atmosphere and Layout

The location and market environment were key factors to the success, or challenges, of a market.

A good location included street presence/visibility, customer traffic (locals or tourists), and visibility or accessibility from main roads. There were other benefits and considerations, including a positive relationship with the facility, affordable fees and access to ample parking. Along with recognizing the role that a good location plays in a vibrant market, the best practices documents noted the importance of clear, informative signage to direct and draw clients to the market.

The Rimbey (Market in the Park) Farmers' Market strives to provide a focused, community-minded market in a natural environment – a grassed park. The market manager endeavours to keep the market family friendly by including old tyme bands for seniors and a play area for young families. While the market is based in one location, it moves during the local rodeo to be more accessible.

Along with a great market location, market managers helped to create an overall feel, or ambiance, for the market. The managers talked about the importance of creating a comforting and warm environment, where customers are encouraged to stay. In some cases this environment included a cafeteria with seating, picnic-style area, or smaller seating areas dispersed throughout the market. Two managers noted the importance of an outdoor, old time market feel and surprisingly, the desire to allow dogs in the market. While outdoor markets have the benefit of being in a natural environment, these locations also have the challenge of weather.

Along with the location and environment, the layout of the market was also a theme in the manager interviews. Nine of the managers interviewed noted a planned approach to vendor placement, considering vendor mix and anchor vendors. Vendor mix focused on placing vendors throughout the market so similar vendors are not side by side. While vendor mix encouraged clients to shop the entire market, managers also used anchor vendors (e.g. vegetable producers) and set entrances to pull clients through the market past other vendors.

You will find the Cochrane Farmers' Market along a treed pathway, the "Stockmen's Trail," through the Historic Cochrane Ranch site. Anchor vendors, including fruit and vegetable producers, are used to draw the patrons through the market, and part-time vendors are rotated to keep the market fresh. The ambiance of the market is enhanced by the addition of community groups and activities, such as yoga classes, that take place in cooperation with the market.

In addition to the above factors, a couple other ideas were raised through the research process. First, the timing of a market needed to work most importantly for vendors, but also needed to work for clients and other markets in the local area. Interestingly, one manager of a community market felt that a shorter, focused timeframe for the market helped to ensure clients come to the market. Second, a good market information booth helped to promote special events, provided client/vendor appreciation, and was a visible opportunity for client feedback.

While the market location and environment were key factors to the success of a market, they also posed a number of challenges. In one interview, a number of environmental threats were identified, which included too many markets causing competition, the impact of weather and the ability of community members to afford market products.

Vendor Recruitment, Selection & Expectations

The foundation of a market is good vendors; therefore vendor selection was an essential consideration that impacts the vibrancy of a market.

Common criteria used for vendor selection included market mix, appropriate competition, vendor commitment, and the geographical location of the vendor's operation. Market mix focused on ensuring a broad range of product quality and diversity at the market, and was directly related to supporting competition in the market. Competition was noted as a hard balance as the number of vendors selling the same product is related to the market size. In addition to market mix and providing healthy competition, priority was also given to vendors who could commit to multiple markets or an entire market season. Additionally, one market required all vendors to use a commercial kitchen for food safety assurances and another market required vendors to be directly involved in the production of their product. Vendor selection should be transparent, clear and conducted by a neutral party.

A variety of approaches were also taken towards stall pricing for vendors. While larger markets tended to have a set price for stalls, smaller markets used variable pricing structures as a method of enticing or rewarding certain types of vendors. This approach included special pricing for full-time, youth, returning or MBG vendors. Additionally, some markets used preferred rates to secure seasonal, monthly or weekly market commitment. In a couple cases, vendors were rewarded with a set stall location due to their long-term attendance at the market.

Clear vendor roles and expectations were also an important part of the vendor selection and on-boarding process. In the larger markets there tended to be more importance placed on having thorough rules to build shared expectations and reduce conflicts. To ensure clarity and understanding of rules and expectations, vendor training was a critical part of the vendor onboarding and ongoing education process. The training available tended to focus on new vendors and was both optional and a requirement, with veteran vendors being welcomed at the training for one market.

While many of the markets interviewed did not note a need to recruit vendors, those who talked about recruitment noted visiting other markets to find vendors or placing ads in newspapers or on-line using services like Kijiji as effective methods.

The Old Strathcona Farmers' Market in Edmonton has a well-established set of rules and policy that guide the market operations. These rules, which are developed by the manager and approved by the board, help to mitigate conflicts and provide clarity of expectations. The manager also takes time to ensure the quality of vendors through on-site visits to the vendor operations whenever possible or as necessary.

Community Engagement

Market managers overwhelmingly agreed on the importance of having a connection to the local community and the concept of community was related to demographics (e.g. seniors, families and youth), community organizations and businesses, history, or food trends. For the smaller community markets, community connection took an even more pronounced role and was tied into the market focus or direction. Community focused market managers used words like "integrated", "buy in", "meeting place," and "culture" to describe their relationship with the community.

The Millarville Farmers' Market has a strong relationship with the community that is built on mutual benefits. The market looks to community organizations and user groups to facilitate parking at the market and in turn, these community organizations share in the proceeds in the form of an honorarium or credit towards the use of the market sponsor's facilities.

Additionally, the market works with vendors of the Millarville Farmers' Market and local businesses in neighbouring towns to coordinate opportunities and leverages volunteers to source advertising for their annual magazine.

Managers also noted that the relationship to the community needs to be mutually beneficial. This meant that the market looked to the community for support and funds, but also supported the community; for example:

- Free booths for not-for-profits, with a limit of one per market
- Community space at the market (e.g. yoga sessions)
- Leveraging community groups as market volunteers (e.g. parking) and providing a financial benefit for the community group
- Social/visiting space
- Innovative methods for purchasing at the market for individuals who are unable to attend

Market Promotions

Promotion was an important component of drawing clients to the market. The most noted communication methods were social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) and word of mouth. Additionally, market managers used a combination of websites, e-newsletters to market members, newspaper and radio ads, live radio remotes, signs and posters to advertise the market.

The challenge with good promotions was that they took time and money. One manager noted having a part-time social media communications person, but this was not a viable option for all markets. To address this challenge other managers leveraged volunteer support and used freebies to advertise.

Additionally, market managers leveraged external recognition of the market by other organizations to increase their market profile.

In conversations about promotional messaging, the managers noted that they focused on special events, telling the story of the market, and highlighting products and vendors. One manager noted the importance of keeping the message "fresh."

The importance of a promotions plan was echoed in conversations with vendors, as they consistently noted that client traffic is the most important factor that draws and maintains vendors at markets.

The Medicine Hat Farmers' Market focuses on promoting people and products. To achieve this goal, a variety of communications media are used to connect with target clients and free promotional opportunities are leveraged. To engage a new client demographic, the market manager switched the radio station that they were using to promote the market and saw a noticeable shift in the type of client that was coming to the market.

Market Activities and Special Events

As part of creating an attractive, vibrant market environment, market managers knew the importance of market activities and special events. Special events and activities drew clients to the market and were focused on engaging specific demographics, promoting vendors, and educating clients.

These activities ranged from educational/ engagement programs to themed market activities to in-market entertainment. Some specific examples include:

- Play spaces for kids (supervised and un-supervised)
- Musicians, buskers and other entertainers
- Special event markets (e.g. Applefest, Cornfest, Christmas in September)
- Concessions or hot breakfast (using vendor products if possible)
- Demonstrations and workshops on market products, local food, food production, and other topics
- Lifestyle activities (e.g. yoga)
- Nutritional and kids programming
- Vendor of the day
- Market gift basket draws, giveaways or loyalty programs

The Beverly Town Farmers' Market in Edmonton strives to create an environment where there is something for everyone. This includes draws for market gift certificates, vendor of the day promotions, a kids' play space, food trucks, musicians and special events, like a corn festival. It is all about creating an ambiance and it is why the market is "the friendliest market in town."

To fund the activities and special events, markets used a combination of vendor support (ie. 50/50 and donations), parking and activity fees, or external sponsors.

The Vendor's Role

Vendors are core to a successful market. While the markets controlled vendor selection, the vendors played an important role as they directly engaged the market clients.

The Southwest Edmonton Farmers' Market (SWEFM) Sprouts program empowers and encourages kids to make good food decisions by providing them with a \$2 token that can be spent on fresh fruits, vegetables and food plants in the market. Many vendors participate by having special products available that are specifically priced for the program. This approach fosters the next generation of market clients.

The best vendors started with a fresh, quality product and if possible, encouraged clients to sample or handle their products. Their products were also priced appropriately, as under-pricing led to a product being viewed as lower quality and over pricing drove clients away.

In addition to having a quality product, effective vendors were approachable, positive, engaging and nurturing towards customers. Engaging the clients provided the opportunity to draw them into their stall, tell the vendor's story and educate about the product. This approach also allowed the vendor to explain why products are priced a certain way. Client engagement was a two-way street, with vendors listening to their customers and ensuring that their products changed to meet customer desires. This contributed to a relationship with the client that was humble and authentic. Vendors should also consider multiple payment options to meet clients' needs.

Vendor displays were neat, tidy, informative and multi-dimensional to provide a strong showcase of their product. Other terms used to describe effective displays included “eye-catching,” “country feel,” and “vertical.” Surprisingly, many managers specifically mentioned the importance of a table cloth to cover the vendor’s table.

In addition to client relations, products and display, vendors were also engaged in the market and broader community. This involvement included:

- Participation in market promotions (e.g. cross-promotion on social media or at other markets)
- Recruiting new vendors at other markets
- Working together to support and mentor other vendors (e.g. covering other vendors during breaks, sharing tips and ideas, or cross-use of vendor products)
- Actively participating in market activities (e.g. kids’ programming and donating items for draws)
- Working cooperatively with market partners (e.g. Alberta Health Services)

Evaluation and Statistics

Feedback and statistics helped the market to stay in touch with customer desires, track success, and make improvements.

Many of the market managers used a variety of evaluation tools, both formal and informal, to assess the market. Specifically, market managers used client or vendor surveys, social media postings and interactions, and ongoing communications in the market as evaluation tools.

Half of the managers interviewed noted that they gather statistics and demographics to set direction and assess the current state of the market. The methods used by these managers included weekly situational reports that included estimated traffic counts, vendor feedback on traffic and sales, and community/industry trends and demographics. Often these statistics were summarized in an annual report at the end of the market season.

The City Market Downtown in Edmonton has a strong system in place to evaluate and assess the market. Tracking processes are used to maintain a strong category mix and to assess the on-boarding of new vendors. Market attendance is assessed through hourly traffic samples counts at each market entrance to estimate the number of market patrons. These methods, along with other data collection, help to set the direction and guide planning for the market.

Conclusions

Best practices can take a market from good to great. In order to be listed as an Approved Farmers' Market in Alberta, farmers' markets must satisfy the expectations set out in the AAFMP Guidelines. After these basic expectations are met, markets can focus on how to enhance their market experience for vendors and clients.

To build and maintain a vibrant market, it is clear that the market leadership must implement a broad range of practices that focus on market governance, management, atmosphere, community development, promotion, and continuous improvement. The common thread across all of the best practices outlined is the importance for the market to stay connected to their vendors, patrons and community. Without these connections, best practices cannot be applied in an effective and impactful manner.

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If you would like more information on best practices for Farmers' Markets, check out:

[Alberta Approved Farmers' Markets Program Guidelines](#) – Alberta Agriculture and Forestry
[Building Successful Farmers' Markets](#) – FARMA (United Kingdom)
[Farmers' Market Best Practices Toolkit](#) – Food Security Network of Newfoundland and Labrador
[Market Makeover: 25 Best Practices for Farmers' Markets](#) – Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project
Selling More at the Market – [Small Farm Canada](#)
[Serious Green: 6 Rules of a Good Farmers' Market](#) – Serious Eats

For more information on this document and the Alberta Approved Farmers' Market Program contact:

Eileen Kotowich, Farmers' Market Specialist
eileen.kotowich@gov.ab.ca 780-853-8223

Mark Shand, Rural Business Specialist
mark.shand@gov.ab.ca 403-948-8507