

## **Networking Strategies to Promote and Improve the Farmers' Market Experience in Arkansas**

\$24,827 was granted to the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, to fund an educational conference for 100 farmers market vendors and market managers. The conference provided training and professional development. The project promoted an alliance between eight northwest Arkansas farmers markets, non-profit organizations, and local governments.

### **Final Report**

**Project Title: “Networking Strategies to Promote and Improve the Farmers’ Market Experience in Arkansas”**

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The project objectives were:

- To provide useful information directly to at least 100 vendors at Arkansas farmers’ markets;
- To enable at least eight Arkansas farmers’ markets to adopt new market management practices or procedures; and
- To form an alliance among at least eight community farmers’ markets in northwest Arkansas that will allow future collaborative efforts.

Activities and Milestones

Activities and milestones for this project were divided into three phases: I) conducting a State-wide Farmers’ Market Conference, II) conducting Mystery Shopper and Customer Surveys, and, III) development of a regional Farmers’ Market Alliance.

Phase I was planning and organizing a conference hosting the annual state-wide Arkansas Farmers’ Market Association (AFMA) meeting in February, 2009. Conference planning was initiated in September 2008 immediately upon receipt of this grant with an advisory and coordinating committee comprised of representation from numerous farmers markets in Arkansas, the AFMA board, the University of Arkansas (UA), the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT), Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (SSAWG), and the Fayetteville Visitors and Conference Bureau. Planning continued with a program subcommittee of representatives through December, 2008, at which time conference promotion commenced through news releases, email listserv announcements, website posting, newsletters and direct mailings. Program topics centered upon issues of importance to vendors, market managers, and market boards. The conference was divided into programs specifically focused on market managers, market leaders, and community organizers, and other sessions specifically focused on product selection, display and promotion for producer-vendors.

Outcomes: Because of collaborative efforts of the advisory committee to create a program of interest to many people in the market system, and in developing advanced promotion techniques for the markets, more than 135 people attended the conference. This was the largest attendance and participation in an AFMA conference to date. Participants were given evaluation and comment forms so they may provide input to future conference.

Evaluation: Participant surveys indicated strong positive response to the conference and that significant learning occurred. Participants indicated that the information provided through the conference will directly impact their markets and the ability to produce, display, market and sell products.

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In Phase II of this project, project staff worked with nine farmers' markets in northwest Arkansas (NWA) and three in central Arkansas to conduct Mystery Shopper evaluations and Customer Dot surveys. These tools are two techniques in the Rapid Market Assessment toolbox (<http://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/pdf/sr/sr1088-e.pdf>). In December 2009, managers and board members from survey participant markets were invited to a workshop to learn how to use these techniques for their market, and the benefits of periodic self-assessment surveys to keep the markets viable and responsive to consumer needs.

**Outcomes:** Twelve markets were evaluated by the Mystery Shopper exercise and 644 customer surveys were collected across these markets. A post-survey workshop was conducted to discuss general trends of the survey and how survey results may be used to improve and build markets. Survey results for each participant market were returned to the market managers. Market assessment survey results and how-to information was also presented at the 2010 AFMA conference to market vendors and managers. The 12 market survey was used as both a model and demonstration of how surveys can be conducted by markets, and how survey results may be used to benefit the market. This topic was well received and resulted in several markets conducting their own market assessments

**Evaluation:** Surveys revealed several general trends. It was learned by the participant markets that the markets needed improved directional signs and way-finding for the market, for access, and for parking, and additional seating was needed for market customers. Markets ranked high on reasonable parking access, vendor friendliness and, logical traffic/pedestrian flow through the market. Customer survey results verified that for 75% of customers, the most important reason for shopping at the farmers market was the availability and access to local produce. Additionally, 77% of survey consumers said they would visit nearby businesses not associated with the market but in proximity to the market. This demonstrated the additional economic value of the market to the local business community. Complete evaluation and survey results were submitted in the October 2009 semi-annual report for this project.

Phase III of this project was the development of the Northwest Arkansas Farmers' Market Alliance (NWAFFMA) to provide a platform for cooperation and collaboration among the region's farmers' markets in order to promote the region's markets and support the awareness, benefits and growth of local markets. None of these markets had previously worked cooperatively or collectively, until this project, to promote and support farmers' markets throughout the region. Several of the markets involved were newer, smaller markets, formed within the last five years, while a few of these markets were larger and had a more extensive history and experience.

**Outcomes:** A series of organizational meetings were conducted by the project leaders from December 2009 - March 2010. The NWAFFMA formalized its organizational structure, board members were elected, a charter was developed and signed, by-laws were written, and an EIN number was filed. The NWAFFMA developed the following mission statement *"to support and promote the success, development, and benefits of local FMs as a viable resource for communities."* The objective of the NWAFFMA is to foster the regional food system through promotion of markets linking producers to consumers. Short and mid-term goals were identified including, developing a website and logo, identifying funding sources for group projects, and

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developing a promotion plan to advance the awareness of local markets. Committees were formed to address these goals. As a result of formalizing the organization, the ability to secure regional and national funding and create impact is greater than what any individual market could achieve individually.

Evaluation: One market representative stated, "I am so glad this is happening. Now I feel that we are working together, not competing."

### Problems and Delays

No significant problems or delays were encountered with this project.

### Future Project Plans

The NWAFFMA has collaborated with the UA and NCAT on a proposal to the 2010 FMPP titled, "*Community Collaborations to Improve Local Economies by Connecting to New Market Patrons.*" The focus of this project is to reach non-market goers by implementing EBT machines at NWA markets that do not have them, working with local WIC offices, SNAP-ed programs, and Seniors programs to increase the participation of lower income families in NWA, and to create an online market for producers and potential customers who have time constraints.

Future projects and proposals are being developed by the group and will seek support through various sources. These include local, community based resources such as through regional banks, state specialty crop block funds and national programs such as the FMPP.

### Funding To Date

The budget for this project was allocated to staff, supplies, travel, and programming. Staff funding was divided among three persons, one program staff each for the UA and NCAT for conference organization and production (UA, NCAT), project management (UA), and project organization (UA, NCAT) and a UA student hourly assistant for conducting market evaluations. Miscellaneous supplies were needed for the conference and market evaluations such as nametags, printing, easels, flip charts, pencils, markers, dot stickers among other things. Local foods, including lunch and snacks, were provided for the conference participants. Travel funds were used for conference invited speaker expenses, travel to 12 farmers markets in northwest and central Arkansas for the Mystery Shopper and Consumer surveys, and to pay travel expenses and meeting expenses for the market managers meeting to hear survey results and organize the NWAFFMA. Specific expense details can be found in the invoices that have been submitted.