

Provide Structure and Marketing to Rural Farmers Markets

State of Alabama Farmers Market Authority - \$75,000 was granted to the State of Alabama Farmers Market Authority, Montgomery, AL, to maximize the full potential of farmers markets in Alabama. Funds were spent training farmers market managers and promoting markets through a series of training workshops. 25 new markets were opened and more than 500 new vendors were recruited. Markets also received new tents and tables.

Final Report

Alabama Farmers Market Authority AL-002-2008-G-0686
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Project Summary

Due to the phenomenal growth of markets in the State of Alabama many markets were started without proper management and organizational structure needed to operate successfully.

Project Approach

Realizing that it is more difficult to implement change in an existing market than to start a market from scratch, the FMA chose to educate farmers and market managers on the changes that would make their markets more successful. The approach consisted of a 'plan first, act second' mentality. The FMA wanted to teach the managers and farmers that it was possible for them to have a successful market in their respective communities without a \$45,000- \$50,000 permanent structure.

Goals, Outputs, and Outcomes

The overall goal of the Farmers Market Authority (FMA) project was to increase the sale and consumption of locally grown fruits and vegetables in Alabama's farmers markets by providing the necessary organizational structure and management to sustain increased sales throughout the market season.

Outputs

In 2009, the FMA conducted four workshops, in different locations, with the purpose of educating farmers, market managers and community activists on improving their markets. The attendees completed surveys that all echoed positive responses towards the FMA and the direction of Alabama's farmers markets. After the last workshop, the FMA immediately began working with the markets that requested assistance.

The purchase of tents and tables provided the markets a sense of stability and immediate identity. Consumers were drawn to the site of fresh produce underneath uniform white tents. Mixed with effective promotion, the markets' beautification took advantage of the increasing desire for locally grown fresh food and connecting with the person that grew it.

The FMA also provided 3 x 8 or 3 x 5 banners to all markets. The banners informed customers of the operating hours. The farmers immediately noticed a difference. According to consumers, the tents, tables, banners, rules and the new managerial structure, have rejuvenated the farmers and created an identity within their respective communities.

The FMA ran a 4 week, statewide advertisement in 9 different newspapers promoting farmers markets and directing consumers to the 'BuyLocalAlabama.com' website. The ads ran during the peak of the season, mid June to mid July, to guarantee a large amount

of farmers and produce would be at the market. Approximately 50 ads appeared over the four week period and the approximate size of the ad was 5” by 5” inches.

To close out the grant, FMA held a market managers meeting in early spring of 2010 with an action packed agenda that included the following topics: Empowering Market Managers; Building Partnerships with Downtown and Community; Opportunities to Enhance Farmers Markets; Trends- How to Make Them Work For Your Market; Wireless EBT; Farmers Market Nutrition Programs; Home-processed goods and Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs). Despite severe weather, the meeting was an overwhelming success in regards of attendance and education of the market representatives with more than 90% of all markets being represented at the meeting.

Outcomes

The FMA’s expected attendance of 300 for the four workshops was well surpassed when the final tally reached 598.

After the 2009 market season, the FMA mailed a survey to participants of the FMPP grant and received a 77% response. The survey included questions about rules, managers, tents, tables, signage, advertising, increased sales, customer flow and future expectations. The survey also provided space that allowed farmers to elaborate on their responses. An important question that was asked of the farmer was ‘Did the organizational and structural changes provide you with an increase in sales?’ 45% responded yes. 96% of the ‘yes’ responses increased their sales by at least 10% and 25 % of the ‘yes’ responses increased their sales by 50% or greater. The information gathered supplied the perspective of the farmer, while also displaying the growth in the number of customers.

After witnessing the beneficial changes made to other markets in 2009, numerous markets came on board in 2010. The market managers meeting helped generate 25 more markets become organized, eight of which received tents and tables through FMPP funds. The markets’ enthusiasm validated the efforts of the FMA. Due to deadline constraints, a survey of these additional markets and vendors is unable to be provided.

In total, the FMA successfully implemented rules, managers, and overall infrastructure in 41 existing farmers markets throughout Alabama, 24 of these markets received tents and tables through the FMPP grant. The FMA derived the total number of vendors that attend these markets by reviewing Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) agreement forms, FMA market visits and interviewing market managers. Approximately 400 Alabama farmers and 100 non-produce vendors have benefited from the FMA project through increased awareness, education, publicity and sales.

The overall result of the FMA’s efforts to rejuvenate Alabama’s farmers markets was a success. The definitive results have been the monetary increases the farmers have enjoyed. Notably, in July 2007, the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) sales were \$266,840 and in July of 2008 the sales reached \$491,188. In July 2009, the SFMNP reached one of the highest volumes of sales ever for any given month, \$501,756.

The FMA attributes this increase of sales to the increased advertising and visibility of the farmers markets.

Beneficiaries

There are many benefits that can be derived from the FMA's project. The markets currently allow small farmers the opportunity to direct-market their products in numerous locations. The markets are generating even more enthusiasm towards buying fresh, buying local and eating healthy. The excitement surrounding each market has created opportunities for different partnerships and sponsorships. With the popularity of farmers markets increasing, other communities will receive the education needed to create their own successful market, by following the blueprints of their neighbors. Farmers, vendors and customers are all direct beneficiaries of the project.

The farmers markets have become a destination within each community, which benefits many local merchants operating in their vicinity. The customers, and particularly SFMNP recipients, also know what time to expect vendors at the market, and vice versa due to the set operating hours. Many local municipalities have seized the opportunity to participate in their respective farmers markets through public awareness, labor or even management. Some markets reside in locations where the farmers market is the only access for fresh produce.

Lessons Learned

One of the lessons learned from the project is that it takes time and patience to develop a successful market, especially after the market has operated for years without infrastructure. Networking is necessary to discover the proper players needed to motivate a community and set forth a sustainable plan for their farmers market.

It can also be difficult in dealing with municipalities during an election year or a tough economy. The FMA turned these issues into a positive occurrence by displaying the importance of patience and planning.

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