

Business Training, Marketing and Accessibility Resources for Growing an Indiana Sustainable Agriculture

Eagle Creek Nature Conservancy and Preservation, Inc of Zionsville, IN received \$35,625 to develop an education and promotional campaign; pilot transportation and delivery system for farmers at the Green market at Traders Point, and a direct-marketing campaign with advertising and promotional events; and purchase low-cost, hot houses for winter and organic production for farmers.

Final Report

Final Performance Report

Date: July 2011

Recipient Name: *Eagle Creek Nature Conservancy and Preservation*

Title of Project: *Business Training, Marketing and Accessibility Resources for Growing an Indiana Sustainable Agriculture-Based Farmers Market and Producer Network*

Grant Number: *IN-053-2008-G-0707*

Location: *Zionsville, IN*

Project Summary *To make the Green Market at Traders Point a viable, self-sustaining entity, focused planning and funding was needed to build a larger customer base and producer/vendor network. Funding made it possible to put measures in place to recruit additional vendors and build customer attendance on market days. Key activities included hiring of the grant coordinator who also handled market publicity (print media, radio, signage), hiring of a part-time market manager who recruited vendors and handled all aspects of market management, establishment of the Farmer's Advisory Board to assist the manager with By-Laws revision and Market governance, and establishment of Friends of the Green Market, a volunteer entity drawn from customers and supporters to act as the Market's primary fundraising arm and to publicize the Green Market using social media and other informal, no-cost publicity channels. Final cost of the overall project was \$34,423.10, slightly less than the awarded amount of \$35,625.*

Tangible benefits

- We increased vendors from 16 fulltime and 8 part-time in 2008, to 19 fulltime and 7 part-time in 2009, to 21 fulltime and 5 part-time in 2010.*
- Approximately half of the fulltime vendors were able to enhance their sales by selling their products to the Traders Point restaurant or farm store.*
- A 10-20% increase in weekly customer traffic was recorded from 2009 to 2010.*

Project Approach

- 1. The goals and objectives of the project were a) to increase year-round consumer attendance and spending at the Green Market by connecting with residents outside of the immediate area and by increasing consumer awareness of the benefits of organic food and sustainable agriculture; and b) to recruit a broader range of organic/sustainable agricultural producers to make the Green Market a "one-stop shopping" spot for locally-grown and produced organic goods.*

2. *The type of strategies that were used to achieve these goals included hiring of a grant coordinator and market manager to carry out the goals. Later, an assistant market manager was added. Another strategy was to formalize the Farmer's Advisory Board structure and revise the Green Market By-Laws to reflect the goals stated above.*
3. *The main activities in support of our strategy were as follows:*
 - a. *A grant coordinator was hired who also handled Market publicity through print media, radio ad placement, radio show appearances, and purchase and placement of strategic outdoor signage.*
 - b. *A market manager (and later an assistant) was hired who recruited and evaluated prospective vendors, increased vendor numbers, retention, attendance, and product diversity, worked with the Farmer's Advisory Board to refine the By-Laws, and handled all aspects of the Market's operation, including special events to increase customer draw.*
 - c. *Collection of data such as customer counts and weather conditions was implemented on a weekly basis.*
 - d. *Vendors were linked with restaurant and Creamery staff to enhance their product sales.*
 - e. *Friends of the Green Market was established to carry out the stated goal of making and keeping the Market a long-term, self-sustaining entity with responsibility for its own funding and expenses.*

Goals and Outcomes Achieved

- *Full-time vendor participation, retention and attendance are at an all-time high, with 23 fulltime and 2 part-time vendors participating for the summer 2011 season.*
- *Product diversity at the Market is at a new high, ranging from traditional meats, eggs, dairy, baked goods, hive products and fresh produce to cutting-edge prepared raw-vegan offerings, exotic mushrooms, coffee beans, hot meals, frozen take-home dinners, chocolate, gourmet pastas, gourmet preserves, all-natural cleaning supplies, bulk worm compost and organic pet foods.*
- *Friends of the Green Market has appointed a board of directors and is fully operational. Farmer's Advisory Board continues to be an effective group for assisting the market manager with interpretation and enforcement of the By-Laws. Thanks to stringent and consistently enforced By-Laws, a full 100% of new meat vendors and 100% of all produce and value-added food product vendors are using organic, sustainable practices and/or ingredients. This makes our Market the only one in Indiana to achieve these standards.*
- *The classification system known as the "Vendor Star" system, which was put in place to classify vendors according to the degree of sustainable and organic practices he/she uses, has continued to be used successfully. A placard, with stars indicating the number of sustainable criteria achieved, is prominently mounted at each vendor's stall during each Market. The primary benefit has been that customers can now objectively evaluate and compare vendors and spend their dollars accordingly. The system also gives vendors a set of goals toward which to work to improve the value of their*

products. Since the introduction of this evaluation system, which is unique in the state of Indiana, other Indianapolis-area farmers markets have followed our lead and begun discussions around implementing signage systems that provide customers with more information about their own vendor's products.

- Our data collection (customer counts every half hour at every Market for the past two years) shows has increased 10-20% when comparing any given week to the same week the previous year.
- As of this time (summer 2011), an impressive 50% of our vendors generate extra revenue by selling their products either to the Creamery restaurant or to the farm store.

Beneficiaries.

- The local consumer community, which our data collection (customer counts every half hour at every Market for the past two years) shows has increased 10-20% when comparing any given week to the same week the previous year. Diversity of available food products has also increased due to consistent recruiting of organic/natural vendors from the central Indiana region.
- Our farmers and food artisans. Although we do not ask our vendors to provide income data, most verbally report an increase in sales, especially during special-event days, such as "Christmas on the Farm". Also, our fulltime vendor participation is at an all-time high, as is week to week attendance, and vendor retention rates are at 80-90%. About half also benefit from selling their products to the Traders Point on-farm restaurant or the farm store.
- Traders Point Creamery. Presence of the Market helps draw visitors and customers to the restaurant, farm store, farm tours, and on-farm summer camps.

Lessons Learned.

(Give the reader insight into such things as:

- *Which strategies worked well during the project? Having grant money to hire personnel made us appreciate how much time it really takes to run a farmer's Market well. We have therefore kept a paid Market manager and increased the number of hours she works so that appropriate attention can continue be given to vendor recruitment, retention, and development, publicity/advertising, and fundraising for the continued improvement and independent operation of the Market.*
- *Which strategies did not work well? Among the implemented goals, all of our strategies worked. However, we did have to discard one of the project's original goals (to offer business and agricultural education to the vendors) as the majority of vendors did not see this offer as being beneficial to them.*
- *What were the unforeseen challenges? The unexpected departure of the original Grant coordinator and the lag time before I could fully devote myself to the position created numerous complications in the smooth and*

timely administration of this grant. As noted below, I also encountered a steeper than expected learning curve in understanding how to properly complete the forms and spreadsheets associated with the grant.

- Were there any unexpected positive results? Yes! As noted in the interim progress report, thanks to an idea gained from resource materials acquired by the previous grant coordinator at the PASA conference (which she was able to attend thanks to the grant funding), we have successfully established the “Friends of the Green Market” organization, described above.*
- “If I had it to do over I would have...” Given much more thought and asked more questions before accepting the Grant coordinator position. Despite having had years of career experience managing 7-figure National Cancer Institute grants for a Fortune 500 corporation, nothing prepared me for the complexity of the paperwork and accounting associated with managing this small FMPP grant. We also did not fully appreciate how much time (and therefore salary) would have to go right back into grant administration, leaving less than expected for actual project implementation.*

Additional Information:

Our major project partner was the Traders Point Creamery staff. The Green Market manager built solid relationships with the Creamery’s Marketing/Publicity Manager, which allowed us to utilize co-promotion opportunities whenever possible to bring customers to both the Green Market and the on-site restaurant in the same trip. During the summer months, both the Market and the restaurant have outdoor venues on Friday evenings, making it possible for customers to enjoy an organic dinner, shop at the Green Market, and tour the farm to gain first-hand understanding of how a sustainable, organic dairy farm works. During December, the Green Market collaborated with the farm operation and the restaurant to host two “Christmas on the Farm” Saturdays that drew over 1400 visitors and generated significant revenue spikes for both the Market vendors and the restaurant.

The added outdoor signage made possible by the grant has generated more “drive-by” traffic from residents in the Traders Point vicinity. We have had many anecdotal reports of customers now stopping at the Market due to seeing the signage.

Finally, although this was not a stated goal for this grant project, inspiration from reading various FMPP and AMS materials has led us to purchase an EBT machine and to work with the State of Indiana to implement EBT purchasing capability at our Market this season, thereby bringing the benefit of local organic food to a new consumer segment.

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