

Farmers Market Managers Mentoring Program

Farmers Market Federation of New York (Fayetteville, NY) received \$30,713 to increase the skills of farmers market managers through a one-on-one mentoring and training processes in order to improve market management practices, market policies, procedures, and service to vendors and consumers. A web-based system was used to share training materials, mentor/mentee applications, and other project deliverables. Funds were used to pay for four regional training meetings and the development of a web-based interface for sharing information.

Final Report

**Farmers Market Mentoring Program
Agreement No. 12-25-G-0739
Final Report**

Project Description and Process

Farmers markets are experiencing a rapid growth in New York State, as well as around the country. As a result of this growth, we are depending on market managers that have no prior experience, nor available supervision or on-the-job training. A recent study in New York found that over 50% of farmers market managers have been in their position less than 5 years. The less experienced managers often find themselves feeling overwhelmed and isolated, especially when the market season is in full swing and there is little time to reach out to other, more experienced managers. As a result, we find that among new market start-ups, there is a 50% failure rate.

Market managers require training to understand their role as a market manager, but also need a backup system that will help them post-training. Annual farmers market manager conferences and workshops help managers to learn the skills necessary to operate a successful farmers markets. However, many issues and questions will arise during the remainder of the year, leaving managers without easy access to assistance.

To alleviate inadequate access to more experienced market managers, increase the skill sets of managers and support the success rate of new farmers markets, the Farmers Market Managers Mentoring program was developed. The program would partner managers with expertise in key areas, with less experienced managers in a mentoring relationship.

The Mentoring program was initially designed to be a face-to-face relationship between mentor and mentee. An online survey was conducted of all market managers in New York to determine:

- Interest level in participating in a mentoring program
- Skills and experience level of each, within a defined set of categories
- What topics would they be willing to share as a mentor
- What topics would they like to be mentored in.
- The time, travel and resource sharing that each mentor was willing to provide or would be requested of a mentor

The survey resulted in 52 market managers wanted to participate in the program. These managers were then invited to participate in web trainings. Training for mentors covered:

- their role as a mentor
- what the expectations of a mentee would be
- how to mentor another
- the expectations of the program
- benefits of being a mentor

A mentee training program was also held to help potential mentees understand the program. Covered in this training was:

- how to work successfully with a mentor
- the information needed by a mentor to assist in creating and implementing a work plan
- the benefits of participating in a mentoring relationship

- expectations of the program

Once the trainings were complete and potential participants understood the roles of mentors and mentees, and understood the expectations of being in a mentoring relationship, the number of participants for the program was narrowed. Nineteen mentoring relationships were then established based on skills, location and time commitments of each participant.

The Federation developed a Work Plan Agreement to help the mentoring partners identify the goals of their relationship and how they would achieve those goals. After each pair discussed their needs, agreed on their goals and work plans, the agreement was to be signed and the mentoring began.

The project moved smoothly through the survey and training phase. However, once the matches were made to pair less-skilled managers with more experienced managers and the work plan agreement were being worked out, the market season began. This slowed the completion of the work plan agreements as each of the managers became embroiled in maintaining their markets. Eventually, all but 2 of the mentor pairings fell apart. Participants, responding to Federation follow-up, responded that they just did not have the time to work with others during the busy market season. Their work was all-consuming and they regretted having to break their agreement to their partner.

After consideration, an advisory committee to the project determined that a web based program would be more effective. An online mentoring program would give managers the convenience of 24/7/365 access to more experienced market managers who could provide information, respond to questions and address issues that arise. After consideration of the best means to bring managers together in a mentoring relationship, we have chosen blogs as an online medium. Five broad categories were defined and blogs were developed for each. A market manager with experience and skills in each of the areas was contracted to post monthly in their assigned blog, and respond to comments within a 48 hour period. The blogs were defined as:

1. Promoting Your Market

- With a goal of building your market's customer base to increase potential revenues for your farmers and vendors, this blog will focus on consumer outreach – paid advertising, promotional efforts, special events and other means of reaching your market's potential consumers.

2. Partnership and Community Relations

- Building your market community – working with local businesses, municipalities, government agencies and non profits to build stronger allegiances, better communications, serve to recruit Board Members or Friends, build market programs and fundraise for the market.

3. Market governance

- A discussion of the infrastructure of farmers markets – governing bodies, such as boards of directors, their roles, the potential impact of their roles and how they interact with the market's manager, the market's farmers and their consumers.

4. Market Operations

- Day to day operations of a market is the role of the market manager. This blog is broad in its discussion of those duties that are required of managers in carrying out the daily operations of their markets to fulfill their market's mission.

5. Farmer recruitment

- Often cited as one of the most difficult tasks in starting a farmers market, this blog will discuss the issues of finding farmers for your market, maintaining the balance of product diversity in the marketplace and building relationships with your growers, as well as other issues related to working with the farmers in your market.

The blogs were established, using Wordpress as the host, then uploaded to the Federation website, www.nyfarmersmarket.com to ensure convenient access for every market manager. Once posts were made to each blog, a round of press releases was distributed announcing them, inviting managers to read and participate. Because it is a web based program, the blogs are open to market managers all across the country, not just limited to New York State managers.

Project Partner Contributions

An advisory committee was established to guide the project. Their original role was to define the parameters of participation in the program, identify the skill sets that would be used to establish mentoring partnerships, and create the survey instrument to determine interest and needs. Once it was realized that a face-to-face program would not work, the advisory committee met to determine the next course of action. They were convinced of the need for such a program, based on manager surveys and discussions with managers. It was the committee's decision to develop the online blogs and their input that narrowed the list of skills into 5 broad categories and their definitions.

Monika Roth, Cornell Cooperative Extension Educator with the South Central NY Ag Team, was contracted to conduct the mentor and mentee trainings. Powerpoint presentations were created and then delivered in a series of webinars.

Peter Elliot, Palatin Digital, is the Federation's web designer. Once the Farmers Market Mentoring Program was underway, Peter redesigned portions of the Federation web site to include the mentoring program. This included creating a space on the navigation bar to make the mentoring program visible and easy to access. Then each training powerpoint was posted on the site, along with the Work Plan Agreement.

Fingerlakes1.com, a web design firm that is fluent in social networking media. This company designed and created the blogs, uploaded them to the Federation website and then trained the Federation staff to upload posts and work the administration side of the blogs – monitoring comments for spam and inappropriate posts, adding meta tags to posts to increase their visibility in a google search and finessing each blog as necessary to improve the looks and user-ability.

Joan Hildebrand, JoEllen Saumier, Bob Buccieri, Laura Biasillo, and Miriam Haas are the market managers contracted to post on each of the blogs. Each contractor has agreed to create

monthly posts to their assigned blog and respond to each comment within 48 hours. Each manager is assigned to their blog for one year.

Lessons Learned

1. Time constraints of farmers market managers disallows for face-to-face mentoring during the market season, limiting the effectiveness of such a relationship.

While enthusiasm for the face-to-face mentoring program was high at the outset of the project, reality dampened that enthusiasm when faced with the demands of operating a farmers market. The resulted in the disintegration of the mentoring relationships.

2. Web based systems are the most convenient and effective means to reach market managers.

Because the web is accessible 24 hours a day, market managers can make use of an online mentoring program at their convenience and as needs arise. Therefore the farmers market mangers mentoring program was moved to an online blog system.

3. Follow-up by a project manager is critical to keep each participant moving forward and to identify problems and failures so that they can be rectified on a timely basis.

As the program progressed, it was essential that follow up to each participant throughout each step be made to keep the project moving forward on a timely basis. For example, managers within each mentoring relationship required consistent follow up to ensure that the team had made contact, worked on their work plan agreement and began the mentoring process. As the market season began and the mentoring work stalled, it was the follow up to program participants that caught the project failure and led to the advisory committee identifying a means to revamp the project to create a long lasting and effective mentoring program.

Future benefits

The mentoring blogs are web based, which gives them a life beyond the grant period. The contracted bloggers have been paid for a year of posts, ensuring the blogs will be active until February 2011. After that a new set of managers will be contracted as bloggers, giving readers a new viewpoint on each subject.

The blogs are hosted on the Federation's website. This draws market managers to the website, where there is additional resource materials posted to assist managers be more effective in their roles. It is more likely that a manager will draw upon those resources if they are drawn to the website for other reasons as well. We feel certain that the combination of the mentoring blogs and the access to resources will increase market manager skills and help to ensure the success and growth of farmers markets.

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