

The **Farmers Market Federation of New York**, Fayetteville, NY received \$33,907 to develop surveys, webinars and a social media toolkit to engage consumers and build awareness of agriculture, local foods, local farms and local farmers markets.

[Final Report FY10](#)

Farmers Market Federation of NY
Using Social Marketing to Build Market Capacity
NY-059-2010-G-1176
Fayetteville, NY

Final Report, September 30, 2012

Project Summary

In New York State, many farmers markets are small organizations operated by volunteer managers or vendor managers. The small size of the market also means that the budgets are minimal, making it difficult to properly promote the market, add programs and services that would benefit both farmers and consumers, nor can they afford to pay a manager a fair salary for the service they perform. Finding ways to increase the capacity of these small, volunteer-managed markets can be a challenge. But through this project, there are affordable options that can help: social media opportunities and Friends of the Market organizations.

Social marketing utilizes free online networking sites to connect with consumers. This is an interactive way to engage them in conversation and promote farms and farmers markets. However, farmers markets and farm stands may not be well versed in using social marketing to make those connections.

Upon completing social marketing training, farmers markets and farm stands began to use social marketing to engage consumers, build a sense of ownership with their site's fans and followers and increase consumer awareness and participation in farmers markets and farm stands, generating additional sales growth for farmers.

Fans and followers of farmers markets were invited to support their market by joining a Friends of the Market organization. With the influx of volunteers from the Friends organization, the market will be able to add new programs and services that will benefit their farmers and consumers and build long term market sustainability.

Project Approach

Social media is becoming a key mechanism for people to relate to one another, gather news and information. Facebook, the social media site most focused on for this project, has over 900 million users, spending over 10.5 billion minutes per day on this site, that's over 12 minutes per person. This figure does not include mobile Facebook applications, which would drive the time spent per person significantly upward.

With this level of interest in social media and the significant amount of time spent on social media sites daily, businesses, both small and multi-national, are finding Facebook and other sites, to be an excellent way to reach their consumers. Social media is personal, which means businesses have an opportunity to build a "personal" relationship with their customers through social media interaction.

Farmers, direct marketing to consumers through farmers markets, farm stands, CSAs, etc, have the same opportunity to improve their consumer reach, educate their public and create a loyal following through their own use of social media.

The project presented a series of workshops on using social media:

- **YouTube – See and Be Seen + How to Create a Well Rounded Social Media Campaign**
- **Blogs – the “Interactive: Website**
- **Face it: Facebook is Here to Stay!**
- **Social Media and Foursquare**

A student intern from Syracuse University’s Maxwell School of Communications transformed each presentation into a Fact Sheet and Auto-tutorial. The fact sheets included extra sessions, including:

- HootSuite
- Incorporating Social Media into Your Marketing Plan
- StumbleUpon
- Twitter
- Social Media 101

The fact sheets and auto-tutorials were added to the Federation website, <http://www.nyfarmersmarket.com/resources/training-and-toolkits/115-social-media-webinars-series.html>. The Social Media tool kit was promoted through the Federation newsletter and press releases issued to New York’s farmers market community.

Interns also tracked farmers market usage of Facebook each month, looking at the quality of the page and the usage. High quality pages were those that added photos to make the page attractive, added posts on a minimum of once weekly, used posts that generated responses; i.e. asked questions; and provided consumers with vital information about the market, such as location, days, times, season. Those markets that used Facebook prior to the training, often had incomplete pages. They omitted key information about their market such as the location or the times. Some pages did not use a picture or logo to identify themselves, instead relying on a stock image generated by Facebook, leaving the impression that the page was only a half-hearted attempt to reach consumers. Others failed to maintain a steady banter, either not posting information, news or market tidbits on a regular basis, or in some cases, no posts at all beyond the initial set up, under the misconception that if they build it, consumers would come.

Once farmers and market managers were well versed in using social media, it became a useful tool to reach consumers with news and information regarding the market, local food and agriculture. Events could be publicized, pictures posted and conversations generated. Markets realized a rise in customer traffic at the market. In addition, the customer base was now more engaged with the market, taking ownership in the market and more focused on the success of the market and its farmers.

Market capacity is a significant issue with small farmers markets. They are often managed by volunteers, or perhaps one of the vendors. The budget is too small to provide for adequate promotions and staffing is little or non-existent, making adding new programs difficult or impossible to undertake. To stretch manpower and build revenue, farmers markets are beginning to develop Friends of the Market organizations. These organizations are, generally, volunteer organizations that support a farmers market. They provide manpower with their membership, they are often established as non-profits and can do fund-raising or grantwriting on behalf of the market and they build community around the market with their ranks of loyal market friends.

Combining the benefits of social media to reach consumers and build relationships with a Friends of the Market organization would help markets to improve their ability to add new programs, provide new services, promote to and reach new consumers and raise critical funds to maintain the financial security of the market. With this goal, the Federation created a toolkit to help markets create a Friends of the Market organization. The toolkit was developed as the Federation created its own Friends organization. The use of Facebook was a big part of creating the Friends organization. The idea was raised on Facebook, generating discussions from Facebook “friends”. A series of posts were used to talk about what a Friends organization is, why it benefits markets, how it benefits the individual members of the group and then discussed the idea of creating an organization. An inaugural meeting was developed and promoted to potential members through Facebook status posts.

Along with working to create a Friends organization for the Farmers Market Federation of NY, we worked with the Friends of the Rochester Public Market. This organization is an independent non-profit organization created to provide programs and services for the Rochester Public Market that could not be performed through a municipally owned and operated market. Specifically, the organization was founded to operate the market’s EBT program. However, once established, the Friends of the Rochester Public Market began a series of programs and services that proved to be invaluable to the market, bringing in greater numbers of customers, offering cooking and nutritional information classes, organizing market events and helping to raise funds to expand market operations. This organization is a role model for a Friends of the Market organization.

With the help of the Friends of the Rochester Public Market and the experiences the Federation was encountering in establishing their own Friends organization, we were able to create a toolkit on establishing a Friends of the Market organization, analyzing multiple models that could apply to a variety of market structures. For example, a larger market, such as the Rochester Public Market, had a wide enough customer base to attract and support an independent organization that could provide a number of services. Another market operation might use a Friends model that was more tightly controlled by the market management, as in a committee of the market. Their role may be more restrictive than an independent operation, but would still provide added manpower to develop market programs and services. With the Farmers Market Federation of NY, operating on a statewide basis, a formal organization was not effective. Rather the model chosen for the Federation was that of creating a database of volunteers, identifying not only names and addresses, but their skills, interests and willingness to travel.

The toolkit for the Friends of the Market organization was created and placed on the Federation website, <http://www.nyfarmersmarket.com/market-manager-market-organizer/110-friends-of-the-market-toolkit.html>. The pieces included:

- Friends of the Market introduction and description
- Volunteer Management: the ISOTURE Model
- Volunteer Interest Form
- Creating a Non-Profit Organization
- Bylaws Template
- Volunteer Job Descriptions
- Webinar presentation

On completion of the toolkit, press releases went out to New York's farmers market community informing them of the toolkit's existence on the website. Part of the press release was an announcement of an upcoming webinar introducing the toolkit and assisting farmers markets in creating their own Friends of the Market organization.

Goals and Outcomes Achieved

As stated in the grant application, the goals of this project were:

1. To build consumer and community awareness of local food and agriculture, influencing their decisions to purchase locally through farmers markets and farm stands.
2. Assist farmers markets with developing Friends of the Market organizations that will increase program development and administration, promotion and outreach, and fundraising.
3. Build customer traffic at farmers markets and farm stands, generating customer loyalty and additional sales and revenues for participating farmers.

The project provided training on understanding and using social media, such as Facebook, to help farmers markets build consumer and community awareness through their own use of social media. The training was given via webinar, but then translated into fact sheets and auto-tutorials that were available on the Federation web page. This was promoted to markets through our email network, as well as through our quarterly newsletters and other communications with market managers.

The training stressed the opportunities a Facebook page presented to markets. It is no-cost and therefore affordable for markets operating on a shoestring budget. But the real cost comes in time. To be effective in creating attention and conversation with followers, market managers must put in time. The Facebook page needs to be attractive, meaning lots of content and photos. It also needs to be consistent, meaning managers need to continue to post on a regular basis to keep followers engaged. Also, the page set up needs to include enough information about the market to allow followers to visit the market without having to make further contact to establish location, dates and times.

At the outset of the project, 29 farmers markets within New York State were actively using Facebook. However, the quality of their pages was not up to par. Many lacked information that told who they were, where and when the market operated. Some lacked even the basics, including a photo identification, relying instead on the avatar photos generated by facebook. Few had market photos to show followers the variety, color and flavor of the market. As well, many of the markets were not posting consistently to maintain communications with their followers.

At the conclusion of the project, 90 New York farmers markets are on Facebook. While not 100% of the pages are complete with photos, regular status updates and critical market information, the percentage of quality pages has significantly increased. For example, 82% of the markets pages provided relevant information on where and when the market operated. As many markets are now moving into winter operations, we are finding posts that provide this information to followers, as well. Consistent posting that keeps followers engaged is critical to using social media as a means to communicate and engage consumers. Over 78% of the market pages are posting on a regular basis and finding ways to solicit conversation. For example, status updates that pose questions have a high success rate for getting customer response. "California will be voting on Prop 37 to require labeling of GMOs. What are your thoughts about Prop 37." This type of post solicits a tremendous amount of conversation and engagement from followers.

The second phase of the project was to help farmers markets build Friends of the Market organizations. This utilized facebook as a means to promote the organization, solicit participants and maintain contact within the Friends group. A tool kit was created that would help market managers to understand exactly what a Friends organization is, what they can do for building a market's capacity, and various models of Friends organizations. Also included in the tool kit were various samples of documents to be used in creating a 'stand-alone' organization, including sample by-laws and instructions for developing a non-profit organization. Finally, documents were included in the tool kit on managing volunteers. The tool kit was added to the Federation web page and promoted through our various communications mechanisms – list serve, email network, newsletter and press releases. The tool kit was also presented to interested market managers through a webinar presentation.

A post project survey was conducted with market managers. Although the timing of the survey, September 2012, was an inopportune time to reach managers, we did receive a number of responses regarding the effectiveness of social media for their markets. Up to 44% indicated that using social media, particularly Facebook, resulted in an increase in customer traffic for the market. Another 50% indicated that their customer traffic increased, but were not sure what they could attribute the increase too, as they tried a number of different strategies to increase consumer awareness. But to accommodate the increase traffic, 25% of the markets were able to increase their farmer base as a result of social media usage, while another 50% indicated they increased their farmer base, but were unsure how much social media usage resulted in their need to reach out to additional farmers to accommodate added customer traffic.

When asked about the use of social media from the farmers perspective, 50% of the markets responded that the farmers reported increased traffic at their stand. A full 62% indicated an increase in revenue could be attributed to a rise in customer traffic as a result of social media usage by the market. Many of the farmers within these markets were able to promote their own farm through the market's facebook page – either by their own postings to the site, or because the market promoted each of the farms.

Beneficiaries

The project benefitted multiple groups. First, the social media training and toolkit, along with the Friends of the Market tool kit and training allowed market managers to learn cost-effective means to communicate with consumers, build a larger consumer base and build an infrastructure that would help them to increase market capacity. The skills learned through this project helped 90 farmers market managers to create Facebook pages to build engagement with their consumers, attract new market consumers and ensure a loyal customer base. The Friends toolkit, available on the Federation website provides market managers with the opportunity to develop a Friends group and increase their opportunity to add programs and services that will build the market's opportunity to support their mission to build a vital market venue for farmers, consumers and their community.

Direct marketing farmers were also invited to participate in the social media webinar training and use the fact sheets and auto-tutorials on the website. Farmers reported (no survey was conducted of farmers, but information was given anecdotally) that using social media to reach their consumers helped them in a number of ways:

- By engaging consumers in conversation about agriculture, local foods and their own farm, they were able to transform potential customers into loyal customers who spent money with them on a regular basis.
- Using social media to engage consumers in the off-season, helped to hold consumer interest in their farm and resulted in a more profitable season opening than in prior years.
- Farmers participating in farmers markets who made use of social media found they were experiencing a larger customer base within the market and, therefore, increased revenues.

A third beneficiary to the project was farm service educators, such as Cornell Cooperative Extension. The training webinars, fact sheets and auto-tutorials were made available to farm service educators. In fact, they were encouraged to participate in these education programs. The goal was to provide content they could be used in working with the farmers and market managers within their own regions. We did receive several calls and emails from Extension Educators and farmers market networks that used the materials in educational programming for direct marketing farmers.

Lessons Learned

When the project was proposed, social media was just beginning to be utilized by businesses to communicate with consumers and potential consumers. It seemed to be an opportunity that farmers markets could take full advantage of. Through the appropriate use of social media, there was a

significant opportunity for outreach and promotion that was cost effective and rewarding. Social media, not only reached consumers, but it engaged them as well. Consumers were drawn into the discussions of farming, food and markets. Their engagement made them a more loyal customer, as an educated shopper with a sense of ownership brought on by their social media interaction. However, bringing markets into social media and then using social media as a springboard for building capacity through a “Friends of the Market” organization proved to be more of a challenge than originally anticipated.

Many farmers markets jumped into Facebook hoping to cash in on the growing consumer trend toward gathering news and information from social media. Some markets were very effective in using Facebook to connect with their consumers. They offered complete information on the market operation, including when and where the market is, and provided updates as soon as any changes were made; i.e. winter market locations. They also posted frequent photos to keep the site fresh, attractive and enticing. Most important, they were consistent in posting status updates. This kept the conversation alive and provided the most information to consumers. The most effective posts were those that queried their followers, drawing them into the discussion. Something as simple as “how did you prepare the veggies you brought home from today’s market trip?” to “more thought provoking things like “farm bill updates in Congress recommend cutting the SNAP budget, reducing the availability of food stamp benefits for people in need. Do you agree or disagree?”.

While the markets were quick to join the growing movement toward social media, it became apparent that social media is not, and could not be, the sole answer in consumer outreach. There is still a segment of the population that has not joined the internet, especially senior citizens. There are also many consumers who are using the internet, but have shied away from social media as being too intrusive. We also find that the rules of engagement with Facebook change frequently. This means that followers today who are getting every status update in their newsfeed, may not be getting these posts tomorrow. Instead security changes and other edits must be done with every Facebook change to allow all followers to see every status update in their newsfeeds. Many people don’t realize they are no longer getting the updates and many others are unaware that they can and should make changes to their personal page to continue to get the status updates they want to see. This has left many consumers listed as followers of market Facebook pages, but not actively seeing or participating in the status updates.

We realize that social media can only be a part of the overall promotion and outreach strategy for farmers markets. While Facebook can be a vital piece of their marketing plan, it cannot serve all consumers and should, therefore, just be one piece of the overall plan.

The second phase of this project was to develop a toolkit for creating a Friends of the Market organization. This was to be done by modeling the toolkit through the efforts of the Farmers Market Federation of NY’s attempts to create their own Friends organization. Through the project, it became apparent that there are multiple models of Friends organizations and each market must decide which model best fits their needs. In the case of the Farmers Market Federation of NY, we found that creating a stand-alone organization would not work. First, it wasn’t necessary to create a non-profit branch of the Federation to help fundraise for markets, a key reason many markets seek a Friends organization.

The Federation is already a nonprofit and therefore, a nonprofit, stand-alone organization is not necessary. Second, the Federation is a statewide organization, covering all of New York State. Creating a Friends organization that would require its own internal structure would be very difficult to bring members together in one location. Instead, we found it would be more effective to create a database of volunteers, identifying skills, project interests and distance willing to travel. This allowed for accepting volunteers from across the state. They could work on projects near them, projects that do not require face-to-face meetings, and the Federation would have a database of willing volunteers. The toolkit then reflected the various models for Friends organizations and provided guidance for each of these models.

Once the toolkit was complete, we arranged for a webinar presentation to build awareness of the toolkit and show market managers how they could use these tools to create their own Friends organization. The timing of this training was ill-fated. The toolkit was completed in May 2012 and ready for presentation. However, summer is no time to bring market managers together, even in a webinar. Although the webinar was highly publicized to New York's market managers, attendance was abysmal. Many managers emailed that they would like to participate, but they just could not take the time during the summer to participate. Knowing that there is interest in this toolkit and in creating Friends organizations, this webinar will be repeated in the winter of 2012/13, even though the grant will have been expired.

Additional Information

To view the Social Media fact sheets and auto-tutorials, visit:

<http://www.nyfarmersmarket.com/resources/training-and-toolkits/115-social-media-webinars-series.html>

To view the Friends of the Market toolkit, visit: <http://www.nyfarmersmarket.com/market-manager-market-organizer/110-friends-of-the-market-toolkit.html>

Contact Person

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Final Funding Request

Personnel:

Executive Director: 62.5 hours @ \$40 per hour
Project Intern: 195 hours @ \$10 per hour

Webinar phone connections: \$25.00

Friends Organization Building: Recipe Contest to draw people to Facebook and engage for Friends organization:

Recipe contest prizes: banners, recipe cards and shipping: \$653