

## **Revitalizing the Toledo Farmers' Market**

**Farmer's Market Association of Toledo** of Toledo, OH received \$23,250 to revitalize the Toledo Farmers' Market through the implementation of a strategic business plan that included a marketing campaign to promote the use of electronic commerce; and the implementation of wireless EBT, debit, and credit card technology. Funds were used to: purchase and implement a wireless terminal and associated fees and tokens; and to pay for an advertising campaign, using print advertising, billboards, signage, direct mailings, and other promotional materials.

## **Final Report**

## **Revitalization of the Toledo Farmers Market**

*The ultimate goal of this project is to revitalize the Toledo Farmers Market thru increasing the number of local customers who purchase fresh fruits and vegetables and value added products directly from local farmers, the total value of those purchases and the number of local farmers who participate in the Toledo Farmers Market.*

## **Final Report**

### **Summary of Issue / Problem being examined:**

1. One significant loss of customers occurred with the change to an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) system for food stamps. This has created what amounts to a disconnect between low income consumers and Farmers' Markets, these consumers had the ability to purchase fresh local produce taken away from them.

While alternatives exist for low income shoppers in grocery stores, there are a number of barriers and differences between these and Farmers Markets. In addition, there are accessibility issues reaching grocery stores for those living in areas of the city that have become more or less a food desert.

2. At the same time Local farmers, like those elsewhere, have continued to struggle. Long-time market vendors have retired, and often there has been no "next generation" to continue bringing farm products to market. Since 1993, membership in the Co-Op has declined by more than 30%, from 58 to 40.

3. With limited resources our media purchases has been restricted to just the major events.

### **Description of Issue / Problem and how it was addressed:**

1. Although accurate records are unavailable, the number of customers visiting the market has declined over the years.

One significant loss of customers occurred with the change to an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) system for food stamps. In an effort to reverse this trend, the Co-Op in 2006 became the first Farmers Market in the State of Ohio to accept EBT through a pilot project. The system designed by FMAT placed a terminal in the Market Office Trailer; EBT Clients must come to the office trailer where their transactions are then converted to Market Scrip, this scrip can then be used out on the market.

Unfortunately the Market Office is not ADA accessible is out of the market shopper's line of sight and is therefore inconvenient. Also, the scrip lacks the feel of currency, has a short life cycle, is difficult and time consuming to produce and account for.

Therefore, with this grant we implemented the following:

Introduction of wireless technology to accept EBT / Debit /Credit cards at the Downtown and Satellite Markets.

Introduction of wireless technology to improve accessibility and convenience of the use of EBT benefits at both our Downtown and Satellite Markets.

We purchased two wireless terminals allowing us to setup in multiple locations at one market or to allow us to have a backup in case one is needed.

We worked with our local credit union to obtain a lower cost alternative for processing fees. Once this was determined we added this to what we anticipated we would need for staffing costs to develop what will be the service fee (3.5%) to provide sustainability to offset these expenses after the grant expires.

After researching our options we decided to purchase lightweight aluminum tokens versus wood or heavier metals so as to keep the weight down for staff, vendors and customers carrying coins. We were able to have these coins minted with our logo allowing them to be unique and also a more secure form of currency.

We worked with our local contacts with the Lucas County Department of Jobs and Family Services to communicate with EBT recipients at their offices and in mailers that there was now a Fresh alternative at the Farmers Market.

2. It was determined through Strategic Planning that the number of vendors we had participating in our markets was in direct correlation with the overall amount of market sales. Therefore, if we can improve the sales / potential sales we will then have a tool to attract additional vendors.

We took the opportunity to educate our existing vendors on what we were doing and how this could potentially increase our sales by developing and expanding our customer base. One important way was keeping the customers informed and educated on what is happening at the market. Another being what we were doing to combat the electronic divide of both EBT and Credit Cards.

A weekly E-Mail blast newsletter was used as the vehicle to inform our customers, collection of email addresses was solicited during all events and market days.

Weekly Management newsletters' were distributed on market informing vendors of what was happening and what was planned. In addition, tips as well as suggestions on ways for vendors to display product or to interact with their customers were featured.

3. This grant allowed us the opportunity to conduct a mass media campaign to educate / promote the introduction of the new payment options and accessibility to the community.

Our original plan was to conduct this campaign using Radio, Billboards and direct mail. However it was determined by the Market Advertising committee that the cost of doing a direct mail portion alone would consume most if not all of the budget. In addition, there was concern that EBT users may not have the exposure necessary for Billboards to be effective. Therefore, in the fall of 2009 we implemented a media campaign using a combination of television and radio to promote the availability of using EBT and Major Credit Cards at all three of our markets. The advertising schedule consisted of Radio and Television commencing the last week of August and continuing through the third week of September. The radio coverage included live remotes at the market that allowed us interview spots to communicate the new programs and how they worked. The reaction we received from EBT users and Credit Card users was overwhelmingly positive as we captured many new EBT customers as well as those looking to use their credit cards.

## Results, conclusions and lessons learned:

### **Success!**

The new wireless EBT / Credit Card processing system has been implemented at our three weekly markets. In addition to the two wireless terminals we minted a total of 20,000 coins.



Shown are \$5 Credit Card Coins (green), \$1 Credit Card and \$1 EBT

- In 2008 we did \$500 in EBT sales; in 2009 we did over \$5,000 and are projecting to do over \$7500 in 2010.
- The accepting of credit cards has been equally impressive, over our "Flower Day Weekend" which is our busiest event of the year we processed over \$6000 in credit card sales, during a typical week we have been averaging around \$700, all sales that would have gone elsewhere if we did not have this option.
- While we do not require submission of sales figures, it has been estimated that overall sales rose **15 to 20% in 2009**. While the "Buy Local" food movement certainly helped, we also think that the markets conquering the electronic / digital divide and becoming more accessible to all customers had an equal impact.

- As for the number of vendors, in 2009 the Cooperative membership has increased dramatically from 40 to 48 Members **a 20% increase**. As of June of 2010 membership has risen to 55 members, **a 37.5% increase** over 2008 membership levels.
- Our weekly email blast subscriber count increased over 50% from 520 to over 1100 in 2009; to efficiently handle this we purchased an on-line email blast service that streamlines the distribution process of our weekly email newsletters. These newsletters are designed to educate our core customers on what is available at the market, background information on our vendors and reinforcement of our EBT / Credit Card processing capability. By farming this out (pun intended) what was taking our in-house staff 4 to 6 hours per week to do manually is now done in minutes.
- With this grant the market was able to purchase a laminating machine; this now allows us to produce our own on-market signs for EBT / Credit Card as well as events. Event signs are distributed to FMAT members to post in their own communities to help draw customers. Also, with this grant we purchased a large banner to hang on the market above the processing station that directs customers.
- Additionally we are proud to report that we added a monthly canning clinic for the 2010 season to go along with our weekly cooking demonstrations. This clinic allows us to teach EBT recipients how to can and store local produce. Our weekly demonstrations are geared towards teaching customers how to use the local produce that is available at that time.
- In addition to an increase in customers and sales we also received an overwhelming positive response from the public in how we have creatively conquered the digital divide. Many told us that they felt we were finally reaching out to a new generation one that uses plastic money; get's their news on-line and stays in touch using social media. In 2010 we began using Facebook as a marketing tool and will be expanding this in 2011 as we implement a revamping of our web site along with the introduction of the use of twitter along with facebook as vital components of our regular advertising.

- This project has allowed us to strengthen relationships with local community support agencies and groups such as The University of Toledo's Urban Affairs Department, The Ohio State University Extension, Toledo Choose Local, Toledo Grows, Slow Food Maumee Valley, ProMedica Health Systems, Lucas County Commissioners Office, Toledo/Lucas County Health Department / WIC program and Lucas County Jobs and Family Services.

**Current / future benefits derived from this project:**

A huge benefit that was generated from the publicity of our mass media campaign was the discussions that have followed with community and social service agencies on the whole disconnect issue that existed between EBT users and Farmers Markets.

Numerous meetings and lengthy discussions were held with local community groups, leaders, congressional representatives' staff and friends of the market to develop a relationship with the Fair Food Network. These efforts created and will implement an incentive program called "Double Up Food Bucks" (DUFB) patterned after the program that was implemented in Detroit, aimed to encourage and foster EBT use at Farmers' Markets for purchase of "local" produce. [www.doubleupfoodbucks.org](http://www.doubleupfoodbucks.org)

The pilot of this program is to happen here in Toledo during the month of October of 2010, this will allow us time to work out the kinks before we launch the program in June of 2011. This program is secured with funding of \$62,000 that was raised primarily through the local community to demonstrate a way to put fresh local produce directly in the mouths of those that need it most.

The way the program works is that we will match EBT users with up to \$20 per visit in DUFB tokens (\$2 denomination) that can be used to purchase only fresh local produce. Vendors participating must agree to limit sales of the DUFB portion to just local produce to be part of the program.

A steering committee of community leaders and agencies has been created to help us plan and implement what will be a multi faceted program. This committee will help us handle the communication, education and transportation challenges that need to be addressed in order to make this program a success. The Center for Innovative Food Technology was brought in to handle the funding of the media campaign for this which will be approximately \$25,000.

Needless to say none of what we have accomplished would have been possible without your help. Your assistance has allowed us to lay the foundation for what we envision will be a fantastic program where EBT users are able to use their benefits to eat healthy nutritious food purchased directly from local farmers that in turns provides a direct benefit in supporting our local farms.