

## **Targeted Professional Development through Blended Learning for Farmers' Markets: A Web-based and Localized Approach to Learning**

**The Ohio State University Research Foundation** of Piketon, OH received \$53,636 to implement a multi-faceted professional development model for farmers' market managers, their boards, vendors, and farmers that leveraged web-based training, social networking, learning forums, coaching, and mentoring. Funds were used to mentor market managers, their boards and vendors/farmers; purchase lap top computers and other supplies; and develop website for the on-line learning network.

### **Final Report**

# THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY SOUTH CENTERS



## USDA Agricultural Marketing Service Farmers' Market Promotion Program Grant

### Final Report

October 2008 – March 2010

Submitted by: Christie Welch, Farmers' Market Specialist

**The Ohio State University South Centers**  
1864 Shyville Road  
Piketon, OH 45661  
Tel: 800-860-7232; 740-289-3727 Ext. 234  
Fax: 740-289-4591  
[welch.183@osu.edu](mailto:welch.183@osu.edu)

## **Issues Being Examined**

This project addressed the gap in systematic professional development of farmers' markets managers and vendors/producers at a time when market conditions are favorable for these professionals to leverage knowledge, skills, and abilities to capture increased revenue and profits. Through pilot research work conducted by the OSU South Centers with Ohio farmers' markets, managers and vendors identified their top issues and concerns as:

- Training (professional development)
- Outreach to local growers/potential vendors (marketing)
- Promotion for the market - more customers and local chefs to purchase products (marketing)
- Meeting the basic needs to keep the market running (management)
- Contact list of other market managers for networking & problem solving (networking)
- Regional newsletters with information, websites, and Q&A's to help the market (networking)

No known comprehensive resource had been identified that addressed these business based professional development needs in a systematic way. This project "Targeted Professional Development Through Blended Learning For Farmers' Markets: A Web-based and Localized Approach to Learning" provided a means to address these needs at a time when farmers' markets were positioned to take advantage of the growing interest by consumers in access to locally produced foods.

Farmers' markets play an important role in the vitality of local food systems and sustainability of small and medium-sized farms. Without effectively leveraging necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to manage farmers' markets as viable business operations, many markets may not be able to capture sufficient market share in local purchases and may even not survive, thus resulting in a loss of income for farmers. By providing this professional development program that blends on-line learning and networking with localized coaching and mentoring, participants were able to access the information in a way and at a time that suits their busy lifestyles.

## **Scope of Work**

The proposed program, focused on three main areas of business including management, marketing, and finance, and was offered through an on-line learning network as well as localized coaching and mentoring. The four major components of the project included:

- Needs assessment
- Development and launch of an interactive on-line learning network
- Localized coaching and mentoring
- Project evaluation

By pairing the website with coaching and mentoring, participants had access to multiple learning approaches and the expertise of the OSU South Centers specialists. This allowed farmers' markets managers, boards, and vendors/farmers to customize their on-

line learning experience for their specific applications and situations. Furthermore, the combination of on-line and individualized coaching/mentoring provided a blended learning approach that addresses all types of learning styles.

Evaluation of the project was conducted to determine the increased knowledge, behavior changes, and resultant economic impacts of participants.

### **Results, accomplishments, conclusions, and lessons learned**

The website was developed and offered a variety of learning options for Ohio farmers' markets managers and vendors producers.



Through the length of the project, October 1, 2008 - March 30, 2010 the website activity was as follows:

- 4,647 Visits (68% New Visitor, 32% Returning Visitor)
- 10,158 Page views
- Visits from 47 States and 20 Countries

Topics of presentations and information include:

- Feasibility Studies and Business Planning
- Bylaws, Choosing a Legal Structure, and Market Liability
- Marketing and Utilizing Technology
- Developing Accounting Systems
- Leveraging Resources and Identifying Best Practices
- Sharing Best Practices
- How to Recruit Vendors

In addition to the presentations, podcasts and videos are available on:

- How to be a farmers' market vendor, Christie Welch, Farmers' Market Specialist OSU South Centers
- Best Practices in Marketing, Julie M. Fox, PhD. Direct Marketing Specialist, OSU South Centers
- Conducting Rapid Market Assessments, Dru Montri, Association Manager Michigan Farmers' Market Association

- Food Safety and Good Agricultural Practices, Hal Kneen, OSU Extension Educator, Meigs County

In addition, the listserv continues to provide updates to the target audience on issues and opportunities related to farmers’ markets. The number of subscribers to the listserv now stands at more than 200 individuals.

The blog is continually updated to provide information and education to Ohio farmers’ market managers and vendors/producers. Articles are archived and can be accessed at [www.ohiofarmersmarkets.osu.edu/blog](http://www.ohiofarmersmarkets.osu.edu/blog)



Finally, one-on-one coaching and mentoring delivered from October 2008 through March 2010, totaled more than 1100 hours devoted to 150 distinct individuals\*. The topics of coaching and mentoring have included;

- How to Start a Farmers’ Market in Ohio
- Best Marketing Practices for farmers’ markets
- Best Marketing Practices for farmers’ markets vendors
- Regulations that govern Ohio Farmers’ Markets
- Resources for Ohio Farmers’ Markets
- How to choose a location for a farmers’ market

And, response to the evaluation of the project with participants revealed that on a scale of 1 to 5 (1=strongly disagree 5=strongly agree) that they have:

‘Increased knowledge of managing a farmers’ market or vendor business’	3.5
‘Increased knowledge of marketing to attract consumers/vendors’	3.5
‘Increased knowledge of resources available to help grow their business’	3.6
‘Implemented best practices learned’	3.5

Economic impacts reported by participants included:

- 8 markets indicated they had secured cost share assistance for their markets totaling \$70,550.
- Respondents indicated their gross sales increased by an average of 17% from 2008 to 2009.

*\*The number of hours of technical assistance reflects total hours of assistance provided by Christie Welch, Farmers’ Market Specialist for all programs delivered from Oct. 2008 through March 2010.*

### **Additional information**

The response from the project has been tremendous! Clients are continuing to thank us for providing the information and assistance. We have developed many strategic relationships that are helping to advance Ohio farmers' markets and support the producers who direct market their products through these markets. A few of the relationships we have developed include:

- The Ohio Department of Agriculture
- The Ohio Proud Program
- The Ohio Department of Health
- The Ohio Department of Aging
- The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services
- The Farmers' Market Management Network
- The Farmers Market Coalition
- The Appalachian Center for Economic Networks

Development of these relationships has assisted us in leveraging resources to serve this target audience. This will provide opportunities to continue to work to improve Ohio farmers' markets.