**Fostering Farmers Market Inclusivity**

Lessons Learned from a Case Study of the

Bloomington Community Farmers Market

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A close up of a sign

Description automatically generated A picture containing food, drawing

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Abstract

The Bloomington Community Farmers’ Market (BCFM) solicited the support of students and experts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to address the following research question: How can the Bloomington Community Farmers’ Market enhance its culture of inclusivity as well as its vendor and visitor diversity? To address this question, a literature review was conducted to identify relevant research and best practices from markets across the country. To streamline the interpretation and application of these findings, they were then divided into two categories: Off-Season Best Practices (strategies which can be implemented outside of the primary selling season) and In-Season Best Practices (complementary strategies which can be implemented during the primary selling season and, specifically, at the market). From these best practices, a series of recommendations was crafted which was targeted to the specific needs, context, and progress of the BCFM. That said, the identified best practices that emerged from our case study of the BCFM can be broadly applicable to markets across the country also interested in cultivating a culture of inclusivity and bolstering vender and visitor diversity.

Introduction

Slated to begin its 46th season in 2020, the Bloomington Community Farmers’ Market (BCFM) has become an iconic part of Bloomington, Indiana - a largely rural area with about 35,000 year-round residents and 45,000 students attending Indiana University. Managed by the City of Bloomington and an integral part of the community’s identity, it has, in recent years, become an increasingly important goal for the market to bolster its culture of and reputation for inclusivity. Baked into its mission, the BCFM strives “To promote a safe and welcoming environment for all while enhancing and reflecting the City of Bloomington’s diversity and encouraging multicultural awareness.” To effectively uphold and further this goal, the BCFM enlisted the support of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Planning and Landscape Architecture. The research question they proposed was as follows: How can the Bloomington Community Farmers’ Market enhance its culture of inclusivity as well as its vendor and visitor diversity? In providing context and specific guidance to the BCFM, we believe other markets across the country can also benefit from our synthesis of ‘Off-Season’ and ‘In-Season’ best practices for amplifying inclusivity and diversity.

Diversity Versus Inclusion

To begin, the terms ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusion’ are often conflated or brought up in tandem, but there is an important distinction to be made regarding their definitions and relationship. Diversity revolves around the demographic composition of a workforce. When putting together a diverse staff team, it may be important to note the gender, race/ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation breakdown of existing or prospective employees. Inclusion, on the other hand, revolves around organizational culture, a culture which either enables or inhibits diversity to be sustained (Spark, 2019). Although an organization may try to increase the diversity of its team by assessing current employee demographics and then engaging in targeted hiring practices, the resulting diversity will not be sustainable if there is not an underlying culture of inclusion. In essence, a lack of diverse representation among employees is merely a symptom of the root issue, the absence of an inclusive culture. In light of this relationship, this report focuses primarily on strategies for reconstructing the culture of the Bloomington Community Farmers’ Market to be more inclusive and, therefore, more amenable to increasing the diversity of its vendors and visitors implicitly over time.

Lack of Diversity and Inclusivity in Farmers Markets

Historically, farmers markets have not been known to be located in diverse areas nor attract diverse populations. First and foremost, there are fewer farmers markets in demographically and socioeconomically diverse areas. An ecological study published in 2015 in Environmental Justice found that the percentage of Black and Hispanic residents in an area was negatively associated with per capita farmers markets. This finding was mirrored when considering a community in which the percentage of residents living below the poverty threshold was greater than the national average (Singleton, Sen, & Affuso, 2015). This lack of farmers markets in lower-income areas in particular can also exacerbate food insecurity (Sneed, 2016). Even when markets are located in areas geographically closer to racially/ethnically and socioeconomically diverse populations, there are still barriers to participation by these groups. In a 2016 systematic review of available research on the matter, key barriers to farmers market use by lower-income populations included: perceptions that food assistance benefits were not accepted, belief that markets had a limited variety of food, lack of access to transportation, lack of racial/ethnic diversity in the market space and mismatches between markets and personal lifestyles (Freedman, et al, 2016). Overall, regardless of the location and demographic composition of the surrounding community, farmers markets continue to attract disproportionately white crowds (McCullen, 2008). As explained in the previous section, a lack of diversity is merely a symptom of an underlying culture that lacks inclusivity. Broadly speaking, therefore, the documented and ongoing lack of diversity in farmers markets seems to be indicative of a more widespread failure of farmers markets to create and convey an aura of inclusivity.

Off-Season Best Practices

In researching and reviewing the practices of other markets who have taken intentional steps toward improving their inclusivity, several specific steps consistently emerge. These steps, found below in greater detail, can be implemented during the market’s off-season, efficiently utilizing that portion of the year to put systems and structures in place to set the market up for success during its operating season.

*Hire staff who reflect the diversity the market wishes to attract in its vendors and visitors*

Generally, speaking, there is much research to suggest that having a diverse staff team can improve the innovation, diversity of patrons, and overall performance of a market or other workplace. To begin, the Harvard College Human Resources Department writes that, “Having diverse staff enables us to understand and meet the needs of people from diverse perspectives, and creates an atmosphere that supports positive relationships and communications.” The Department continues, “By building a reputation for valuing differences, we can attract talented employees who know that we will appreciate and utilize the skills, backgrounds, perceptions, and knowledge they bring to the table. This leads to greater commitment and higher productivity” (Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences Human Resources Department[,](https://hr.fas.harvard.edu/files/fas-hr/files/recruiting_for_diversity_9.17.13_0.pdf) 2013). A diverse staff team can bring a diverse range of skills, experiences, and ideas to a workplace. In hiring an increasingly diverse set of employees, an organization can benefit from the innovation that comes from the infusion of new and divergent perspectives and backgrounds. Additionally, diversity in an organization can breed diversity in both the future members of the staff team as well as in patrons of the organization. Finally, more diverse staff teams are correlated with improved overall performance. According to a January 2018 McKinsey & Company analysis of over 1,000 companies in 12 countries, having an executive team that is more gender diverse or more ethnically and culturally diverse than other same-sector companies is associated with greater profitability and longer-term value creation. Specifically, even more so than having a gender-diverse executive team, having an ethnically and culturally diverse executive team boosted company performance by a statistically significant 33% (Hunt, Yee, Prince, & Dixon-Fyle, 2018).

While the above research can be applied toward many industries, ranging from higher education to entertainment to government, many farmers markets and food-specific entities have also taken note of these findings. For example, the Portland Farmers Market promotes the following *Diversity in Hiring* statement:

“We believe that to be an effective leader at growing an equitable, healthy, and sustainable local food system, we need to reflect those principles internally. It all starts with a strong foundation. Embracing equity as a guiding principle, we encourage employment applications from candidates with diverse backgrounds and from underrepresented groups. We believe that when our staff represents a diversity of perspectives and life experiences, we can be most responsive to the needs of our vendors and shoppers, and better reflect the communities which our markets call home.” (Portland Farmers Market, 2014)

Additionally, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) acknowledged the value in hiring staff people in summer meal provision services who reflect the diversity of student and community recipients. In Orlando, Florida, for instance, the FNS commended the Orange County Community Action Agency’s efforts to hire staff who reflected the diversity of the Haitian community it aimed to serve. The FNS noted that building a staff team who was cognizant of the cultural and socioeconomic issues facing the community members helped to facilitate the smooth provision of services and allowed for an expansion of the number of sites at which they could provide summer meals in this Haitian community (U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, 2019).

*Encourage or mandate additional staff training*

Providing specific educational and training opportunities to employees of a farmers market is an important component of creating an inclusive culture. First, cultural sensitivity training should be provided as it aims to reinforce the idea that each visitor and vendor of the market will bring different ways of communicating, different expectations, and different backgrounds/abilities. As defined by Penn State Extension, cultural sensitivity is “a set of skills that enables us to learn about and understand people who are different from ourselves, thereby becoming better able to serve them within their own communities” (Fonseca Estrada, 2015). Of specific relevance in a farmers market setting, being trained in cultural sensitivity will allow staff to better understand and build trusting, open, respectful relationships with vendors (Watson, 2019). Creating an inclusive market culture will inherently require this trust, openness, and mutual respect. Second, conflict resolution training would also go a long way toward facilitating an inclusive environment for all market stakeholders. Conflicts are inevitable in a market setting, ranging from vendor-customer price disputes to customer-customer miscommunications to vendor-staff policy disagreements and more. If handled effectively, though, conflict can ultimately lead to increased trust, productivity, and group unity (Katz & McNulty, 1994). With conflict resolution training, farmers market staff should ultimately feel capable of helping vendors and visitors to feel heard when communicating their concerns and empowered to be an active part of the solutions (Watson, 2019). All in all, by encouraging or requiring market staff to participate in cultural sensitivity and conflict resolution training, they can gain a deeper appreciation for the cultural differences of their vendors and visitors as well as practice techniques for productively diffusing conflict when it arises. With these frameworks in place, a market can then move toward a culture more inclusive of differences of background and differences of opinion.

*Pay attention to language used and the brand identity it creates*

An important but often overlooked consideration in creating an inclusive environment is how the market is promoted and how its mission and offerings are communicated. This brand identity serves to either encourage or discourage certain vendors or visitors from feeling welcomed and taking part. Further, this brand identity gets communicated to potential vendors and visitors both explicitly through promotional avenues (such as advertisements and a market’s website or social media channels) and implicitly through product offerings and price points. Wholesome Wave’s National Nutrition Incentive Network echoed and advised, “The language you use can have a profound effect on how people feel, even if subconsciously. Take a fresh eye to your promotional materials from a customer’s perspective; even better, run your pieces by community members to assess comprehension and to obtain feedback” (National Nutrition Incentive Network, 2016). Small changes to language used on signage around the market, for example, can have amplified effects on the inclusive culture the market creates. The National Nutrition Incentive Network first recommends using simple and clear language, translated into various languages as necessary, coupled with images so as to accommodate visitors and vendors of all backgrounds and abilities. They next recommend minor reframing in the messaging communicated by vendors. Rather than hanging a sign that says ‘We accept Market Bucks’, vendors could be encouraged to write ‘We gladly accept Market Bucks’ or ‘We welcome Market Bucks vouchers’ (National Nutrition Incentive Network, 2016). The subtle difference in tone that these language choices convey contribute to the overall inclusive feel of a market.

More broadly, where a market chooses to share information can dramatically influence who is reached and then convinced to attend or sell at the market. In addition to physical signage and the most traditional ‘word-of-mouth’ promotion, markets can utilize press releases, radio or television advertisements, local news or public access television programming, and various internet channels. For example, the Crossroads Farmers Market in Hyattsville, Maryland chose to promote their market on El Zol, the most popular radio station among Latinos in the area (Project for Public Spaces, 2008).

At the end of the day, market executives have the ultimate responsibility of cultivating brand identity through their provision of directives to vendors as to the types of signage and phrasing encouraged as well as their innovative choices in marketing avenues. Further, the market staff themselves should pay special attention to how the word choices and tone they utilize on the market website, in the vendor policy handbook, in verbal communications, and on other promotional materials can make vendors and visitors feel either included or excluded.

*Emphasize key community partnerships*

Seeing as farmers markets often play the role of community gathering places or community hubs, it is critical that markets position themselves to be immersed and ingrained within the community. Symbiotically, a farmers market relies on support from the surrounding community to be successful and to develop a culture of inclusivity just as much as members of the community rely on the market. Within the literature, there are distinct strategies which a market can follow in targeting community organizations with which to build partnerships. The National Nutrition Incentive Network, for example, offers the following strategy, “Form partnerships with community-based organizations to build ties to the neighborhoods your market serves. In addition to the large groups that serve the community (who may be easiest to reach), seek out the smaller organizations who may have deeper ties to residents” (National Nutrition Incentive Network, 2016). Another strategy recommended by the Project for Public Spaces included forming relationships with community organizations which could serve targeted program development initiatives. For example, a market striving to influence the health outcomes of the community might aim to partner with organizations that focus on nutrition education or childhood obesity. A market trying to improve its diversity of visitors may look to partner with local immigrant rights non-profits or ethnic grocery stores (in other words, community entities which would be more familiar and important to the types of visitors it was trying to attract) (Project for Public Spaces, 2008). Finally, a market can strategically partner with community organizations based on their ability to advertise to or reach sub-populations which are not aware of or ordinarily do not attend the market. As an example, the Toledo Farmers Market in Ohio identified food stamp recipients as a sub-population which was under-represented at the market. To address this under-representation, market staff forged advertising relationships with County Jobs and Family Services, Lucas Metropolitan Housing Agency, and the Toledo Area Regional Transportation Authority. These community entities were known to serve residents living in public housing developments in the area and could, therefore, more readily reach the targeted sub-population and encourage their attendance at the farmers market (Project for Public Spaces, 2008). All in all, a market can employ one, some, or all of these strategies in developing community partnerships. Whatever the strategy, though, it is critical that a market build strong relationships with community organizations which more readily reach and comprehensively represent the needs and interests of the diverse populations it hopes to attract.

*Offer additional support for under-resourced vendors*

Just as a market might implement training opportunities for its staff, it may also consider offering similar professional development opportunities to its vendors. In offering educational and professional training opportunities, the market can begin to attract farmers and growers who are newer to the industry, who are newer to the area, or who are struggling financially. Further, whereas many farmers or growers may feel that they cannot participate in a market if they do not already have a following and proven sales success, this additional support may send the message (implicitly or explicitly) that vendors from all levels of experience and success are welcome at the market. Webb City Farmers Market in Missouri was successful in employing this less traditional technique. As highlighted in the Project for Public Spaces *Diversifying Farmers Markets: New Opportunities for Farmers, Communities and Consumers* report, “Market staff realized that the farmers and gardeners supplying the market were not realizing their full production potential due to a lack of knowledge about local/regional growing techniques and business strategies. To address this issue, Webb City implemented a series of training workshops focused on growing techniques, soil improvement, pest control, and safe food handling. These trainings, which targeted the market’s Hmong vendors and utilized a translator to help lessen communication barriers, were very popular and played a key role in increasing the production of vegetables.” In total, these trainings helped to increase sales in the following year by as much as 700 percent for Hmong vendors (Project for Public Spaces, 2008).

Farmers markets can also offer other forms of assistance to under-resourced current vendors or as a means of bringing under-resourced prospective vendors into the fold. In his project for The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative, Watson suggested that, “Markets should consider flexible policies for the fees that vendors pay to participate in the market: a large one-time fee at the beginning of the season may present a hardship for small farmers while paying smaller payments throughout the season may be more feasible. Under-resourced vendors may also benefit from business and market technical assistance from the market or other vendor” (Watson, 2019). At the Bloomington County Farmers’ Market, for example, the cost to reserve a designated selling space ahead of time during the peak season (May through October) is $468 for a large space and $260 for a small space (City of Bloomington Parks and Recreation, 2020). This upfront cost may be prohibitive to new or struggling vendors. In allowing for case-by-case adjustments or payment schedules, vendors can participate who might otherwise be categorically excluded on the basis of cost. Additionally, Watson’s suggestion of providing business training or other professional development opportunities for vendors may serve to attract new, less experienced, and under-resourced sellers. For markets located in higher-income areas in particular, this practice may entice vendors from lower-income areas to travel and participate, improving the reach and potential for diversity within the market.

In-Season Best Practices

Once a market has made strides toward building inclusivity in the off-season, there are additional action steps the market can take to solidify this inclusive culture while the market is in full swing. These steps, outlined below, can reinforce the market’s off-season practices and set the market up for a longer-term, sustainable culture of inclusivity.

*Collect comprehensive vendor and visitor data*

A farmers market, as any business, cannot tackle problems or shortcomings based on hunches or intuition. When a problem arises, a market must follow logical, methodical steps to understand the nature and scope of the problem prior to determining the most appropriate solution(s). In terms of improving a market’s culture of inclusivity, it is important that the market first seeks to understand the demographic breakdown of its vendors and visitors (race/ethnicity, gender, age, income level, educational attainment, food assistance reliance, shopping frequency, geographic location, method of transportation/travel time). There are many methods of accumulating this data, some more efficient or effective than others. Published in 2012 in the Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition, a study of 185 farmers markets nationwide found that most markets employed at least one of the following data collection methods: vendor applications, customer surveys, customer counts, and customer demographic information collection. Specifically, customer surveys were often designed by market managers themselves or in collaboration with nearby university students or interns and most frequently asked about shopping frequency, reason for shopping, and market preferences (Karpyn, Kim, DaCosta, Gasinu, & Law, 2012). Broadly, a farmers market cannot improve a lack of diversity or inclusivity if it does not know in detail who is coming to or selling at its market, where they are coming from, and what brings them there.

For some markets, it may make sense to employ a data collection toolkit to efficiently assist in the compilation and analysis of data collected. For example, the Farm 2 Facts toolkit, developed in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin-Madison, can empower markets to make more informed decisions and improve communication with stakeholders and potential funding sources. The Farm 2 Facts toolkit can facilitate the tracking, estimating, and interpreting of metrics including but not limited to: percentage of visitors from represented zip codes, total program sales under incentive programs like SNAP and WIC, and average years in the farming industry per vendor (Farm 2 Facts, 2020). These particular metrics, for instance, provide insight into whether a market is reaching households in certain geographic areas, catering to low-income households that benefit from public assistance programs, and attracting vendors who are newer to the industry - all facets of a market’s inclusivity.

*Leverage the off-season groundwork*

The extensive efforts implemented during the off-season to create the foundation for an inclusive market culture can be amplified through various in-season choices and tactics. First, after training market staff in cultural sensitivity, developing partnerships with community-based organizations, and offering support to new, more diverse vendors, a market can put these efforts to use through culturally relevant cooking demonstrations during the market’s peak operating hours. As Watson emphasizes, “Cooking demonstrations that show how to enjoy less familiar foods and foods from various cultural traditions will help customers from various backgrounds feel confident that they are understood and that they can prepare the foods being sold at the markets” (Watson, 2019). Relatedly, these cooking demonstrations can also highlight ways to feed a family on a budget, one way of making lower-income visitors feel considered and welcomed (National Nutrition Incentive Network, 2016). Second, the market’s culture can benefit from inviting culturally or otherwise significant community organizations to share information at or host events during the market. The National Nutrition Incentive Network recommends collaborating with the local SNAP agency to encourage them to host a table at the market and share information on eligibility and applying for food assistance support. They also suggest hosting events, festivals, or performances from entertainers that acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of the surrounding community (National Nutrition Incentive Network, 2016). In all, a market can achieve a more inclusive environment through employing the lessons learned during off-season staff training opportunities, mobilizing community partnerships, and living up to the inclusive language and tone it set in promotional materials.

Lessons Learned

Applicable to markets of all shapes and sizes, Table 1 below compiles the aforementioned best practices identified through our review of existing literature, intentional steps which we believe can help markets cultivate an underlying culture of inclusivity and, subsequently, allow for the fostering of sustainable vendor and visitor diversity.

Table 1: Summary of Identified Best Practices

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| --- | --- |
| **Off-Season Best Practices** | **In-Season Best Practices** |
| * Hire staff who reflect the diversity the market wishes to attract in its vendors and visitors * Encourage or mandate additional staff training * Pay attention to language used and the brand identity it creates * Emphasize key community partnerships * Offer additional support for under-resourced vendors | * Collect comprehensive vendor and visitor data * Leverage the off-season groundwork |

Based on conversations with BCFM market staff, some of these techniques had already been explored and/or implemented. However, there remained several areas in which we believe the BCFM could continue to enhance its culture of inclusivity and improve its diversity in vendors and visitors over time. Overall, our case study of the BCFM illustrated the ever-evolving, ‘moving target’ nature of fostering farmers market inclusivity. The above Best Practices should be interpreted as ongoing processes rather than one-time tasks. To truly build and sustain an inclusive culture which results in heightened diversity of vendors and visitors, a market must regularly re-evaluate its perception, participation, and progress. We look forward to checking back in on the Bloomington Community Farmers’ Market to see how these practices have, in time, helped to position their market as a regional leader in openness and diversity. Further, it is our hope that other markets across the country can benefit from our synthesis and categorization of broad best practices related to inclusivity and diversity.

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