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A Learning Approach to Strengthening Farmers' Markets

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The dot-research method is very valuable. First and foremost the process is fun and engaging for both the volunteers and our customers. Our survey results are currently posted in the market every week in front of our volunteer booth. Each week people stop and read the results, then share how we could use this information to build a stronger market in our neighborhood. The process is so simple that we are continuing to do the dot survey in the market this year.

—Suzanne Briggs, Hollywood Farmers' Market

Farmers' markets play a significant and expanding role in ensuring the viability of America's small farms and the vitality of its towns, and although their importance in the food distribution system is growing, they remain poorly understood. At the local level, most farmers' markets lack the resources, information, and skills needed to document their role in the community and to plan for the future.

This research and extension effort has three objectives:

- Provide markets with the essential information they need to improve their operations.
- Develop research methods for conducting quantitative and qualitative research in farmers' markets.
- Provide managers and board members with opportunities to critically examine each other's markets, develop their own analytical skills, and establish a mutually reinforcing network of individuals who share information and insights.

The three objectives are interrelated—we focused initially on the first objective, established the second objective as a way to achieve the first, and later added the third to make the effort sustainable. We have taken to calling the combination of meth-

ods a "Rapid Market Assessment" (RMA) and have conducted eight RMA studies in the last two years.

The Power of Information

In a world in which Wal-Mart has real-time data on all of its operations, farmers' markets languish at the other end of the information spectrum. In most instances the markets serve as a meeting ground of independent businesses and collect no information beyond the number of vendors and the stall fees paid. Their limited staffs are hard pressed to do anything beyond simply getting the markets up and functioning each week. Enhanced information about the functioning of these markets would enable vendors to better meet customer demands and would help markets gain increased public and business-community support.

We considered standard data-collection approaches for filling this information gap. We concluded that on-the-shelf approaches did not fill our needs: random mail or phone surveys are inadequately targeted and expensive; in-market interviews are hampered by small sample size; and mail-back surveys handed out in the market have very low response rates.

We decided instead to develop our own methods that would be quick, inexpensive, and reliable. As a final and most ambitious goal, the data collection process should add to rather than detract from market atmosphere.

Developing Quantitative Data-Collection Methods

Most markets operate in the open air without clearly defined entrances and exits. One result is that markets have little sense of the number of shoppers they serve. Because both vendors and communities value this information we designed a standardized way of estimating market attendance. We minimize the manpower requirements by counting entering customers at all possible entry points for only

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ten minutes at the mid-point of every hour and multiply those counts by six to get an hourly average. This approach has helped markets to better understand the size of their customer base, and (if done multiple times) how their markets vary both within a season and between seasons. Markets have found the attendance counts to be simple and useful.

Addressing market spending and other data-collection needs required greater creativity. The dot survey approach that we developed consists of constructing close-ended questions (we typically ask four carefully crafted questions per market) that are displayed on posters at a central location in the market (Lev and Stephenson). Shoppers are invited to answer the questions on their own by using stick-on "dots" (colorful round labels). It takes participants one or two minutes to answer all four questions and go on their way, although some choose to stay and discuss the research.

Before discussing the advantages of the approach and some results, we will address three concerns. First, are participants influenced by prior answers (which are all visible)? For most questions, this simply is not an issue – where do you live, how much did you spend, even how old are you are not questions for which the participant really cares how others have responded. In fact, in our experience the response rates on difficult questions such as age are higher than through other survey approaches because it is clear to the respondent that anonymity is preserved. Nonetheless, several strategies can be employed to reduce this "influence" concern. We generally "seed" the posters with scattered dot responses and later remove these seeded dots. On some occasions we have replaced the posters with fresh sheets at regular intervals so that new respondents will place their dots with less prior information.

A second major concern with the approach is that only a few close-ended questions can be asked. This is certainly the biggest drawback, and should not be underestimated. But it does force the market to focus on what information is most important and ensures that all the data are analyzed in a timely fashion. In addition, because this is a low-cost approach it is feasible and preferable for the market to collect information on multiple occasions.

A third concern with the approach is the difficulty of conducting cross tabs on the data. Ordinarily it may not be clear how answers to different

questions relate to one another, but it is possible to code the dots so that this information is available. In our view the advantages of dot surveys in farmers' markets far outweigh the disadvantages. The approach is extraordinarily simple and inexpensive. The transparency of the research process—everyone sees everything—turns out to be one of the most appreciated aspects of the approach. It makes the research interactive rather extractive. Participants often stop back later in their shopping to see how the responses are shaping up. In our experience this data-gathering approach really does add to rather than detract from the overall atmosphere of the market.

This is a high-volume research approach—we have had as many as 900 participants in 5 hours (180 per hour). When using this approach we have kept careful records and have documented that 90 percent of the consumers we approach are willing to participate in the surveys. This compares very favorably with response rates for all other survey methods. The superior quality of the sample should improve the accuracy of the data collected (Salant and Dillman). We also have specifically asked consumers if "they prefer this approach or more traditional written surveys;" 94 percent favor the dots. The results can be quickly tabulated. For a Saturday market we typically provide the answers to the market board on Monday morning. Finally, as mentioned above it is quite feasible to repeat questions and thereby have greater confidence in results.

The information obtained has been eye-opening and quite useful to the markets we have studied. We always let the market studied select the questions; our statewide effort suffers slightly from not always asking the same questions, but the gain in relevance to the specific market more than makes up for this.

Here are three examples of the information collected with comments on why the information was useful (Lev and Stephenson, unpublished data):

"Was the farmers' market your primary reason for coming downtown this morning?"

	Corvallis Saturday	Albany Saturday
Yes	78%	88%
No	12%	8%
Partially	10%	5%

Many downtown business communities are lukewarm supporters of farmers' markets, in part

because they don't believe markets really bring people downtown. This question, along with the attendance counts, provides some data to address that concern.

“Will you be doing additional shopping in this area on this trip? If yes, how much do you anticipate spending?”

Market	% Doing Add. Shopping	Average Amount Spent
Albany (1998 average)	38%	\$4.32
Corvallis (1998 average)	63%	\$10.13
Hollywood District (2000)	47%	\$8.98

This second question examines whether or not the people attracted to the market actually do any shopping at neighboring businesses. The extent of spillover sales depends on the attractiveness of the adjoining businesses (downtown Corvallis has more to offer than downtown Albany). In several markets, we have found that spillover sales have been as high as 80 percent of in-market sales.

“What stopped you from buying more at the market today?”

	Corvallis Saturday	Corvallis Wednesday	Hollywood District
Nothing else wanted	67%	60%	55%
Couldn't carry more	13%	11%	17%
Out of money	10%	14%	14%
Prices too high	6%	8%	5%
Ran out of time	4%	7%	8%

This question was prompted by repeated comments by some dot survey participants that prices in farmers' markets are “too high.” The question assesses if price or other factors really do constrain sales. The results are remarkably similar across markets and the overall conclusion is clear: for most consumers, prices do not represent a major factor limiting their purchases. This result shows the power of collecting responses from hundreds of shoppers instead of listening to the opinions of only a few.

The markets have used the information col-

lected in a variety of ways:

- Attendance counts and market sales:
 - Demonstrate to community leaders the value and popularity that residents place on markets;
 - Provide potential vendors with market-size information.
- Drawing power of market and spillover sales:
 - Quantify for community leaders the broader economic impact of markets;
 - Demonstrate to neighboring businesses the value that the market can provide to them.
- Where customers live, why they come to the market, and what stops them from making additional purchases:
- Assist market boards in allocating their budget (advertising, entertainment etc.);
 - Assist vendors in selecting and pricing their products.

Rapid Market Assessments

The data-collection methods proved useful and productive. We studied several markets and distributed widely both the results and the explanation of the research methods used. While we hoped that other markets would be inspired to replicate the methods, the more common result was that the other markets simply made use of these initial results with the comment that their own market was “sort of the same.” Most managers viewed the data collection as too great a hurdle.

So we refocused our attention on developing a way to better encourage the spread of the methods. One idea that surfaced was to enlist market managers as data collectors outside of their own markets. But once the managers have put their time and effort into getting to the target market, there should be a better means for taking advantage of both their expertise and their eagerness to learn about market management. Bit by bit we moved towards a *participatory-action research (PAR)* model in which the practitioners (market managers) were fully involved in the research process (Whyte).

We developed a system of recruiting teams of four or five managers or board members from markets around the state and bringing them together to study a market on a specific day. During the RMA the team members collect quantitative information using the methods discussed above and conduct a

qualitative assessment of the market. This qualitative process follows a precise set of steps.

The night before the market all of the team members gather and have dinner with the market manager and market board. The manager and the board discuss the history and current circumstances of the market. We ask them to focus on the specific issues of how they define success and where they want the market to be in five years' time. The dinner provides context and sets up relationships for the next day.

At the market the team members learn first-hand how to conduct the attendance counts and the dot survey. Once they know how simple and effective these methods are, they are much more likely to use them in their own markets. The team members are also given a series of three worksheets (physical setting of the market, vendors and products, and market atmosphere) to complete over the course of the market. The assignment really seems to capture their interest and involvement. Each person brings a fresh set of eyes to the task and notices different things. They are encouraged to do whatever it takes to become experts on this market—follow shoppers around, talk to them, watch vendors, and explore the neighborhood. At the end of the market we get together for a debriefing of both the qualitative and quantitative research activities. During the debriefing we talk about their main observations as well as their suggestions for improving the research process.

Within two days of the study the quantitative results are emailed to the studied market and the RMA team members. It is very useful to be able to provide this information quickly. The process of collating the qualitative reports is more time consuming. All of the market worksheets are typed and then one of the researchers takes on the job of compressing the five or six different reports into a single short report that follows the format of the three worksheets and has separate sections for what the observers appreciated about the market and their questions about or suggestions for improving the market. This report is also distributed by email. A conference call is scheduled to discuss the top three to five issues to come out of the overall process. As an example, here are the five issues that were selected for the Hood River market this past year:

- What would be the advantages and disadvantages

of reorganizing the Hood River market so that all of the agricultural producers are grouped in one section, all the prepared food vendors in another section, and all the craft vendors in a third section?

- What advantages would adding seating near the music and prepared food provide to the market? Is on-site storage one requirement for making this feasible?
- How can the market encourage improved vendor display and signage?
- What can be done to improve links with tourism? Is cross-marketing possible?
- Any further ideas for how to attract market volunteers in a small community such as Hood River?

Summary

Overall the RMA process is exhilarating and empowering. All of the involved markets gain new insights and ideas through this two-way learning process. The markets studied have received detailed quantitative and qualitative information on important issues. The RMA team members are better connected, more analytical, and more confident about conducting research in their own markets. Based on their experience studying another market, they go back to their own markets full of new management ideas and options.

My experience with the assessment project was wonderful; both as a team participant in Ashland and having a team visit our Wednesday market. The information and insights were wonderful. It was time well spent and enjoyable, even in the middle of a busy market season! What a good way to meet my peers. Sometimes I feel isolated (even though I am surrounded by vendors, customers and board members!). No one really understands like another market manager. It is great to work with such a sharing, caring, dedicated bunch of folks!
—Dianne Stefani-Ruff, Portland Farmers' Market

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