

Increasing the Healthiness of Consumers Through Farmers Markets

Abstract

As health and wellness issues in the U.S. continue to rise, Extension workers are presented with an opportunity to use nontraditional methods to support public health. Farmers markets serve many goals, the most important of which revolves around individual and community health. They are among popular tools for supporting public health by making healthy food readily available, thus treating obesity and reinforcing the idea of good nutrition. The number of farmers markets in the U.S. continues to grow, and this steady increase demands that Extension, planning, and other policy professionals understand the various individual and public health goals they achieve.

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Introduction

Farmers markets serve many public and private goals (Morales, 2011a). There are now about 7,864 farmers markets in the U.S., growing from about 1,744 in 1994 (Cone, 2012). This steady increase of farmers markets demands that Extension, planning, and other policy professionals understand the various individual and public health goals they achieve.

Farmers markets are part of a differentiating system of food distribution (Day-Farnsworth & Morales, 2012) and an important type of marketplace (Morales, 2011b). They help achieve political, social, economic, and health-related goals. For instance, politicians canvas for support and "first-amendment" provisions, making markets conduits of information. Socially, community is built around the market, and "heads-up" consumption fosters interaction that integrates people across race, class, or lifestyle (Sommer, Herrick, & Sommer, 1981; Project for Public Spaces, 2003; Morales, 2011b). Economically, people earn income and learn business skills that enhance economic mobility. However, here our focus is on how marketplaces foster individual and public health.

Achieving Health-Related Goals

Food policy advocates (for example the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The Food Trust) are

making markets part of multi-pronged strategies (inclusive of supermarkets and corner stores) for improving urban health and food equity (Flournoy & Treuhaft, 2005; Treuhaft & Karpyn, 2010). Markets achieve increased individual, community, and public health by locating in proximity to populations, by addressing food access issues through locating in low access "food deserts," by promoting the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and by offering health services and educational programs.

Farmers Markets in "Food Deserts"

Many food-access problems result in part from market-driven decisions of major corporations and supply-chain economics of small business (Eisenhauer, 2001; Tropp & Barham, 2008). When regional grocery chains fled inner cities in the 1960s and 1970s, the supermarkets that replaced them typically had higher prices and smaller selections of fresh, nutritious foods (Morales, 2011c). Additionally, low-income neighborhoods tend to have fewer easily accessible supermarkets compared to higher income neighborhoods. Unhealthy diets result from lower income families having to purchase low-cost, readily available foods full of fats and sugars over higher cost, nutrient dense foods. If the the number of accessible farmers markets is increased, individuals will improve their diets by increasing their consumption of fruits and vegetables (Suarez-Balcazar, Martinez, Cox, & Jayraj, 2006).

SNAP

Demand from farmers' market merchants and federal government support has increased the use of electronic benefit transfer machines, allowing consumers to spend SNAP benefits at markets (see Parsons & Morales (in press) for how to integrate EBT into markets). SNAP is meant to increase food access and security by allowing low-income consumers to purchase healthier produce. Many market leaders and vendors have "triple bottom line" interests in that they care about their own and local economic well-being, the environment, and, most important, individual and public health. By offering SNAP, markets show that public health should be the key driver for changing food systems policies by making healthy food choices more available to low-income consumers (The Food Trust, 2004; Muller, Tagtow, Roberts, & MacDougall, 2009).

Health Services and Educational Programs

Farmers markets can be located in proximity to population centers, thus becoming walkable, which promotes individual health. Besides this exercise opportunity, farmers markets are a conduit for health and nutritional information, services, and products. For instance, Community Services Unlimited in Los Angeles incorporates healthy food and nutritional education, for example health screenings, immunizations, and cooking classes, in their markets and programs. Making marketplaces multi-service enhances community access to multiple dimensions of individual and public health.

The USDA offers education grants to increase market usage as more customers learn about how they can use their SNAP benefits. One education program is the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program used by City Fresh in Cleveland, Ohio. This program offers a lesson each week based on a

featured vegetable, coupled with a recipe, tasting using the featured vegetable, a take-home recipe, and information regarding nutrient content and storage of the featured vegetable. Participants are also offered a graduation certificate, a recipe book, and a free share for 1 week once they complete 10 lessons (Ohri-Vachaspati, Masi, Taggart, Konen, & Kerrigan, 2009). Other programmatic ideas such as rewarding SNAP families with "double bucks" programs for purchasing fruits and vegetables and sending children birthday vouchers to be used at the market will make eating healthy easier as low-income consumers learn how to incorporate new foods into their meals. Incorporating innovative programs like these will improve the local economic prospects of farmers and neighborhoods as well as enhancing individual and public health.

It is important that Extension work with market leaders to research grant and other opportunities, such as the USDA's Farmers Market Promotion Program, that could be used fund SNAP or other innovative market programs (O'Hara, 2011).

Conclusion

Markets, especially farmers markets, are among popular tools for supporting public health (Robert Woods Johnson Foundation, 2008; Lee, Mikkelsen, Srikantharajah, & Cohen, 2008) because they make healthy food readily available, thus treating obesity and reinforcing the idea of good nutrition. In short, markets can increase physical activity, social health, and emotional well-being through the produce and various programs they offer (Health Care Without Harm, 2007; Project for Public Spaces, 2003; Moon, 2006; Fried, 2008).

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