

COUNTING SHOPPERS at YOUR FARMERS MARKET

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Shopper or customer counts are an important tool for all farmers markets. Knowing the number of shoppers on a given market day, a given point in the season, or total for the year provides data that helps markets evaluate the impact of events (including unplanned ones like bad weather or a Seahawk's post-season game); helps you know if a particular promotion worked or not; vendors can use shopper counts to estimate their sales potential; and markets can make the case to surrounding businesses or the Chamber of Commerce about the potential spillover economic impact of the market. Having the documented number of shoppers at your market is invaluable when you need to make key management and planning decisions.

There are various methods on how shopper counts are done. There are ways brewing that use high tech tools to capture unique cell phone signals, but for now there are two main ways: the “walk around method” and “OSU RMA” way – to use their technical names. Each method uses a handheld clicker or “tally counter” that you can buy for under \$5.00.



Whatever your method, the shopper count is always an **estimate**. There is always a human factor that includes some level of error. Even using the same method may yield different results for the same market day. The key is to use the same method consistently because even if the numbers are not precise if they are measured the same way each time, then they will be imprecise in more or less the same way each time. Likewise, the details of who a number was calculated should be in your notes along with any assumptions. This should give you more awareness about any way that the numbers may be off and confidence in any patterns or trends over time.

Walk Around Method

The “walk around method” is when a designated person from the market systematically walks through the entire market and counts each shopper (or visitor) that they see. While not as precise as the OSU RMA method, a single manager can usually do this on her own.

Counting every unique shopper once can be tricky as people move or can be hard to see, especially in a crowded market. Once the route and who gets counted are agreed upon, the next big question is *how often* to do the count during the market day? Some markets make an assumption that shoppers, on average, stay 30 minutes in the market. So, they then do their counts every 30 minutes. If you assume shoppers stay 20 minutes, then ideally you would do your count every 20 minutes. Sometimes markets don't have the staff or volunteers available to do this many counts and may only be able to do one “on the hour” or once per market. The key is to be consistent and document your method.

Shopper Count Method	Who's Counted	Amount of Time Needed	Number of People Needed	Level of Precision
Walk Around	Usually unique “shoppers” but could also be “all visitors.”	Varies by market size (how long walk through takes) and how many counts per hour are done.	Can do with one person.	With experience can be OK in small market; harder to be precise in large market.
OSU RMA	Adult shoppers.	10 minutes per market hour.	Best with one person per market entrance.	Reasonable.

OSU RMA Way

Researchers at Oregon State University have systematically evaluated different ways to do customer counts as part of the Rapid Market Assessment¹. They recommend counting all adults as they enter the market to get a “reasonable estimate.” Typically, a market has multiple entrances, so each entrance would need a person stationed there with a clicker in hand to do the count. This is easier said than done sometimes as the delineation of market “entrances” varies wildly by market. Drawing a map can help make sure all entrances are covered and consistently counted.

OSU recommends counting all adults entering the market for 10 minutes from 25 to 35 minutes after the hour. This total is multiplied by 6 to get the estimated hourly count. The number of adults in the market when it opens, a “pre-market count” is also needed.

10 minute count for Hour 1 X 6 +

10 minute count for Hour 2 X 6 +

10 minute count for Hour 3 X 6 * +

Pre-market count of all adults in the market when it opens =

Total market shopper estimate for the day

* adding as many hours are needed

Who gets counted can be a subject of discussion and should be clarified with the RMA team. Lev et. al recommend counting “all adults.” As the definition of “an adult” can be subjective, the counter may have to make a judgment call. The key is to be consistent. Teenagers who look like they have a wallet and seem to be there to shop may be counted, whereas teenagers clearly flying through on skateboards should not be counted.

¹ See Larry Lev, Linda Brewer, Garry Stephenson, “Tools for Rapid Market Assessments” Special Report 1088-E, May 2008.