

Vendor Relations and Boundaries for Market Managers

Chapter 6: Happy Vendors, Happy Managers

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Just as there are differences between farmers markets, there is no “one size fits all” approach on how best to work with vendors as a farmers market manager. Markets have different levels of staffing. Many markets have a sole manager who does it all. Others may have a team with assistants, volunteers or board members who play key roles on market days or throughout the season.

Markets also have different approaches to setting rules and policy based on their own philosophies, the mission of the market, or number of vendors. Likewise, different markets have different models for enforcing rules. Some markets have a Market Master with various degrees of authority. Some markets have prescribed administrative procedures for enforcement of rules, while other markets simply might opt not to invite a vendor back after an infraction.

This article is based on the way we work at Pike Place Market. By no means are we “experts.” We’re speaking from our own experience and hope it might be helpful to you in some way. Despite any differences, we all have a common passion for our markets. And we all have a passion for farm-related causes, whether it’s helping small family farms, protecting farmland, or cultivating local foods for our communities.

As Karen Kinney, Executive Director of the WSFMA, says:

Trust is the grease that keeps a market running smoothly. After all, while shoppers are the vendors’ customers, vendors are the market’s customers. How a manager communicates, makes decisions, and enforces rules can build -- or compromise -- trust with vendors. If vendors know that the manager is fair, consistent, transparent, and paying attention to their interests, then it is much easier for vendors to accept decisions -- even if they don’t like them.

Recommended Practices: “The Do’s”

What is your actual job and scope of responsibility?

As we all know, market managers wear a number of different hats. And these hats may change through the season as well as over time. Regardless of the specifics, market managers must be strong in organization, communication, financial management, rules enforcement, as well as being extremely creative!

Market managers are often the key element to the success of a market. And a big part of this success is how well they balance the needs of farmers, shoppers and the community. One question to reflect on is: **What are your responsibilities as a manager?** Here again, different market managers have different sets of responsibilities with regards to vendors. They may include:

- Vendor recruitment and selection;
- Creating and reviewing vendor applications;
- Vendor placement;
- Collecting stall fees and sales data;
- Managing the overall vendor mix;
- Enforcing product standards/authenticity;
- Featuring vendors in promotions; and/or
- Working with a vendor-based board.

The market manager’s responsibilities may also include resolving conflicts with and among vendors as well as enforcing not just market rules, but also those required by the County health department and City; as well as other policies.

What is your market’s mission?

When thinking about your market’s approach to setting and enforcing rules, we recommend reflecting on your market’s mission. **What are the goals of your market?**

Markets are started and grow with different goals in mind. Your goal may be:

- To provide selling opportunities for local farmers; or
- To help make connections between consumers and those growing their food; and/or
- To increase the availability of fresh produce in the community.

Your market’s mission should set the framework for any rules it has. Is part of your mission to: Provide the public with fresh farm products? Provide farmers with excellent business opportunities? Provide equitable business opportunities for vendors? Ideally, the market’s rules and regulations are designed to support its mission. This provides a foundation for fair and judicious enforcement of rules, and provides a solid basis for the manager’s authority.

A clear mission statement for your market will help the vendors understand the rationale for your rules. For example, if your mission includes “providing a diverse mix of farm products,” then you might offer space to the only available potato farmer instead of a fifth cherry farmer. The farmer who is denied space can see that you are acting with the expressed mission in mind.

What are your market rules?

In many ways, the market rules define the market. For instance, if the market’s mission is to provide a venue for local farmers then the rules might emphasize farmers over crafters or prepared food vendors. Your market rules should be fair and equitable. A vendor should be able to perceive that he/she receives similar treatment to another farmer in a similar situation.

Be open and transparent.

As a market manager, it is important to be open about your market rules and transparent about how they were developed, why they matter, and how they are enforced. In addition, it is important to be clear to vendors what pieces are the manager’s responsibility and what pieces are not. Lastly, as it is the market manager’s job to look out for the best interest of all the vendors (and shoppers), being open and transparent helps to fight the perception that some vendors may be getting different or more favorable information.

Network with other markets and managers.

As there is no set playbook for farmers markets, your best resources for helping to resolve questions and problem-solve specific issues are, of course, other markets and managers.

Get to Know Your Vendors

Like anything, the more you get to know someone or something, the better able you are to navigate your relationships.

Learn as much as possible about who they are and what they do.

Starting out might be as simple as asking them: how do you do this?

Make the rounds!

Talk to your vendors at their tables (while being conscious of not interfering with sales, of course). Observe what they have to deal with on a daily basis.

Ask your vendors about themselves and their products.

For instance, at Pike Place Market we have several Hmong farmers from northern Laos. Early on, several of the Hmong women were very shy and it was clear that it would take time to build a trusting relationship. Learning a few words in Hmong really helped. Although my pronunciation was bungled, the Hmong women would laugh and we ended

up forming a much closer relationship. I know I am a better manager today for reaching out and getting to know them better.

Make yourself available to your vendors.

Being available to your vendors is important. Even if they don't volunteer any input about the market, they will have a lot to say. We have to seek out their feedback and be sincere about it. Everyone knows a phony and once that bridge is burned, it is hard to repair. And your vendors are the people who will make your market a place shoppers love to come to every week. Try to be consistent to visit every vendor each week so no one feels slighted.

Visit farms.

Many markets don't have the staffing to visit all their vendor's farms. Luckily, we work at a market that has the resources to do farm visits. Visiting a vendor's farm serves two purposes. First, it allows you as a market representative to ensure that the farm is complying with market rules and expectations. Second, it gives you a chance to see the vendors doing what they love. They get to see you at work every market day, and visiting them on their farm, is a chance for you to see and appreciate all the work they do on a daily basis.

Visiting farms is also a great way to (re)connect market managers to the reason they choose to do this work in the first place. For example, when we did a honey inspection, we got to put the bee suits on.

Maintain Good Professional Boundaries

The market manager has a very unique role at their farmers market. "The Role" has an interchangeable nature. If the market has more than one person who manages the market, it is critical that everyone on the team interprets and reinforces rules in the same way.

Keep in mind that certain groups (e.g., vendors, board, or community members) may feel some ownership or attachment over the role of a market manager. The market is important to them and the authority the manager wields can impact vendors' livelihoods. Market staff should fulfill their role in a meaningful way that maintains and advances its integrity.

Some considerations include the maintenance of integrity and the avoidance of the appearance of favoritism and the conflict of interest. Do

The rapport you build over time and your performance as a manager are your greatest assets. Let vendors see that you are a hard worker.

Be accountable.

Be fair.

Be consistent.

Be compassionate, yet firm.

Be honest.

And shop!

Handling conflict is part of a market manager's job.

Yet how people deal with conflict can be really different. It may have to do with their relationship to authority and fear of consequences. It may be respect-based and depend on the rapport and perception that the leader has the well-being of the community as their primary goal.

It is also important to self-reflect, especially when working with diverse groups of people: am I bringing any baggage to this interaction? Does this person remind me of someone else? Is that hindering our interaction?

personal friendships get in the way of treating all vendors equally and fairly? Are you able to say "no" to someone you really like, when it is in the better interest of the market as a whole?

Do you accept gifts that might undermine the appearance of fair treatment of all? There are no cut and dry rules for accepting gifts. The most important thing is to be aware of how accepting gifts from vendors can affect the integrity of your position. Many times gifts are genuine expressions of affection and gratitude for the work of a good manager. Sometimes gifts may have ulterior motives or be an attempt to obtain favor.

Regardless of the intent, accepting a gift can become the source of a conflict of interest - even months later. A manager may have accepted a box of pears from Farmer A, and then later have to referee a conflict between Farmer A and Farmer B. It is more acceptable to accept a small "market discount", as many vendors offer to all market insiders such as staff and other vendors. The discount should be reasonably small, and not in the form of a token payment: a token dollar for a box of pears is still accepting a gift. Avoiding or politely refusing gifts can preserve the integrity of the manager's authority. Some phrases that help with these interactions: "*I want you to make money and be successful here,*" or with humor, "*You want to have a market manager that doesn't take gifts.*" Whether or not gifts are appropriate may depend on your market's level of structure, whether it is a public market or a privately owned. The key is market managers must be extremely careful when vendors offer gifts and aware of possible unintended consequences.

Markets have many moving parts, and typically involve many people. Conflict is inevitably going to confront the Market Master. What sort of conduct and professional relationships will put you in the best position to provide equitable solutions for your market?

Teamwork

It is really important for the market staff (and working volunteers) to be on the same page in terms of market rules and expectations. For me to call something one way one day and my colleague to call it a different way later is confusing for the vendors. It also

undermines the authority of any decisions and a sense that the market staff is really working together.

Whether you're a staff of one or four, consistency in how you enforce rules and intervene in problems is extremely important. You want to present a united front and not let the vendors perceive that your policies or views about policies are divided. If we, as market staff, decide that farmers need to arrive by 8:00 am then we need to enforce it. Once we do so consistently, it no longer is a problem.

The key is to treat all vendors fairly. And while you might get along better with some and worse with others, you cannot play favorites or even give the appearance of doing so.

Good communication can be hard work but it is essential to good teamwork and good relationships with vendors. Email can be a great tool. We also have "Market Master" reports that help communicate in a concise and efficient manner what transpires from shift to shift.

Create an environment where conflict can surface and be resolved. It's OK if discussions are "spirited," but they must always remain respectful.

Build a rapport with vendors through responsiveness, fairness and hard work. It is also important to be firm. You need to establish that you have a backbone.

And while there is a time for firm, there is also a time for flexible. This is dictated by the demonstrated record of the vendor. Sometimes a "good faith approach" works best until a pattern dictates otherwise.

At the end of the day, in our opinion, it is better to err in good faith versus act on a misguided suspicion. In other words, it is better to let a potential minor transgression go than to erringly enforce a rule with someone who was either a) in compliance after all, or b) who was out of compliance as a result of genuine misunderstanding. If a vendor is truly going to cause trouble for you, then they will provide other opportunities to catch them at it.

Dealing with Conflict

The market manager's job comes with various types of conflict. This includes conflict between the manager and vendor(s); between vendors; and between vendors and shoppers.

Initial responses to disputes

- How you present and conduct yourself matters. Always strive for a calm and respectful demeanor.
- While you want to be consistent with your decisions or judgment calls, you don't want to seem like a mindless robot. Tailor your interactions to the needs of the individual you are working with as much as you can.
- De-escalate the situation if needed before proceeding with any discussion. If people are in a defensive mode or emotional, then they probably won't listen anyway. You might also want to redirect the discussion to a different time and place.
- Keep focused on your market's mission and rules. Refer back to what the rules say about this particular matter as the basis for your action. If the issue is not directly addressed in the rules, try to determine what the rules infer. The key is to avoid the perception that you're in some way judging or punishing the vendor *as a person*.
- Make peace with ambiguity. If you don't have an answer right away, try to simply state, "I don't know. I will get back to you ASAP." And then do that. Alternatively, you might also offer, "This is my best call for now. I will double-check and get back to you ASAP." And then do that.

And then what?

When a decision is made or conflict resolved, a key step is to simply be sure to "put it in writing." This helps to make sure all parties understood the same thing. Notes include a description of what happened, what was discussed, any reference to rules, and what the agreed next steps were. If there is a continuing problem, suggest "let's make an appointment to discuss this." And then be sure to follow up.

Point to the line as you cross it "for the last time." Put another way, you can tell the vendor, "I am going to make an exception for you this one time. But now that you understand the rule at hand, you will be expected to comply with it from this point on." This provision of structure helps the responsible vendor learn while discouraging the less responsible vendor from expecting exceptions. Make sure that if you make an exception "this one time" that you are ready to enforce the consequences if the vendor repeats the problem behavior.

Vendor versus Vendor

At the farmers market, vendors will come to you and complain about other vendors. What do you do in these situations? Our advice in these situations is to:

- Get information before taking sides. Make sure to talk to all the key people so you get information from different perspectives.

- Encourage autonomy. Can the vendors work it out themselves? Did they try? You might start by asking:

“Did you talk to him about this...? Will you do that please and then get back to me if that doesn’t work?”

“I think that the two of you can work this out yourselves, but I am here if you absolutely need my help.”

Encouraging such independence is empowering for the vendors, builds community within the market, and decreases the workload for the manager! You should be careful about becoming enmeshed in conflicts!

- Define limits to your involvement. Offer a plan that diminishes your role over time.
- Help the disputing parties to maintain their focus on the “here and now.”
Sometimes it can be counterproductive to rehash the past and the best way to move forward is to work toward agreement on how to work together from this point on. While in some instances revisiting past conflicts can reveal misunderstandings and therefore lead to insight and conflict resolution, in other instances it risks reopening old wounds in a way that escalates the conflict instead of resolving it.

Vendor versus Shopper

When vendors and shoppers have conflicts it is extra difficult as managers have a relationship with one side (i.e., the vendor) or, in some cases, both the shopper and the vendor.

- Stay neutral while gathering information.
- What do your rules say about customer service standards, such as a return policy?
- Encourage parties to work it out.
- If needed, your involvement, action and/or decision should be based upon your rules that pertain to the issue at hand.

Professionalization of Market Management

Being able to handle conflict at your market in a professional way adds more “arrows to your quiver.” Think of having special arrows that work better for hitting different kinds of targets. The more arrows that are in the quiver, the greater the chance the archer has of hitting the bulls-eye. Adding to your repertoire of practices, interventions, and skills gives you more tools to handle problems and minimizes their impact so that you can spend more time and energy connecting farms and shoppers in pursuit of good food! Above all, keep talking with other managers. Network and support each other, and learn from each other. Compare notes and share experiences and continue to help us shape this profession!