

The “Market Vitals” Project

By Colleen Donovan & Karen Kinney

As the visibility and expectations around farmers markets grow with every season, so too does the demand for information and stories about farmers markets. Increasingly, there is also a need for “data” – not just for a market but also for a city, county, or the entire state. The USDA and Farmers Market Coalition are also working to gather data that represents the entire country.

Data can be used to communicate successes to volunteers, the media, and potential funders; to recruit vendors; and to monitor sales. Individual markets need data to evaluate whether or not a special event brought in new shoppers or if an advertisement was worth the investment. How do your numbers compare over time? Do you see any trends? How does your market compare to other markets in your area or the state? And, at the aggregate level, we need data to speak credibly to our policy makers about the importance of farmers markets, as well as to educate advocates about markets’ most critical needs.

What is “data” anyway?

But what do we mean by “data”? And how is that different than the other numbers and information we collect? In principle, data distinguishes itself by aspiring to be grounded

Why collect data?

Learning

To capture knowledge and skills gained or experienced during a market day or season or multiple seasons.

To set benchmarks and know if you achieved your goals and objectives.

Transferring knowledge

Putting what you learned to use.

Sharing with other staff, volunteers, vendors, markets.

Capturing impact

Measuring the difference that the market is making in economic, community, environmental, and political terms...

...and across geographic scales whether it’s your neighborhood, town, city, county, region, or state.

in scientific theories and methods. Ideally, the ways data is collected should be standardized and transparent; the data analysis should be empirically objective; and reports should be as open and unbiased as possible. That’s the goal.

In other sectors of the agricultural economy, grower marketing interests are represented by commodity commissions or industry groups. With farmers markets, it is far more of a grassroots, bottoms up effort. And the work of collecting data is especially challenging. Why?

To start, business is largely done on a cash-basis; this is changing but cash is still the rule. There are no bar codes, cash registers, or club cards to track consumer data. Second, each market has multiple vendors and vendor types – each is a unique small business that may or may not want to share information. These businesses may have very different ways of managing information – from formal protocols to the “back of the envelope” – so vendors might not always have the data you need available in the moment. And, finally, while markets may be consistent within their own organizations, there are few “industry standards” about what data to collect and how to do it. This is especially challenging when the market manager is already juggling so many responsibilities. So, what do we do?

Market Managers Come Together

In November 2010, a group of nineteen market managers from King County, WA came together to discuss and create a list of twelve “Market Vitals.”¹ The idea was to select only the most important indicators for farmers markets to monitor – their “vital statistics.” The assumption was that a limited number of thoughtfully selected pieces of information would be easier to collect, monitor and remember. We also know that too much information can get in the way and cause us to lose sight of what is actually important. It turns out that our brains are especially good at keeping track of groups of five. So our goal was to come up with two groups of five (or a total of ten) “Market Vitals.”



Workshop participants review notes on the ‘sticky wall’ for each of the Market Vitals.

To maximize its impact, we knew this project had to be as inclusive of as many market managers as possible. Knowing how busy managers already are, we wanted to keep the project both manageable and relevant to each market. Being able to think across a

¹ The workshop was organized by the King County Agriculture Program and Puget Sound Fresh by Karen Kinney and Colleen Donovan.

county, region or even statewide was also a goal to see how individual markets relate to other markets and to collect information at scales that could be used for policy work, local decision-making, and planning. We agreed that to be considered a “Market Vital,” the data had to meet all three of the below criteria:

1. **Be realistic for a manager with one market to collect;**
2. **Be meaningful; and**
3. **Be able to be aggregated with other farmers markets’ data.**

With this plan in mind, the question remained: what are the most important pieces of information to collect? What’s the equivalent of a farmers market’s pulse, blood pressure, weight, height, age, and cholesterol?

Starting with the experience of all the managers and market organizers at the workshop, we looked at some of the existing tools. The Neighborhood Farmers Market Alliance, for example, shared the “Market Stats” sheet that they complete every year. It includes a column with data for each of their seven Seattle farmers markets and is an excellent example of tracking and reporting market data.

The Market Vitals

Below is each of the twelve “Market Vitals” identified, including a working definition, ideas on how it can be used, and ideas on how to collect it without too much extra wear and tear on the market manager. A ready-to-go Excel sheet is in the Tools section.

	MARKET VITAL	DEFINITION <i>per season</i>	<i>ideas on HOW VITAL CAN BE USED to help markets</i>	<i>ideas on HOW IT CAN BE COLLECTED</i>
1	Shopper Count	Total # of visitors, of all ages, who come to market during market hours per season.	Recruiting/informing vendors about customer base; fund-raising; monitoring trends.	Clicker method at the entrances or a walk around the market every 30 minutes. The key is to be consistent.
2	Total Vendor Sales	Total reported sales from all vendors per season.	WSFMA membership; impact as an “industry;” support for small businesses.	Market day report forms.
3	Total Farm Sales	Total reported sales from farm vendors ⁺ per season.	WSFMA membership; economic impact; impact on WA agriculture; garnering ag support; vendor recruitment; underlines shared values of farmers markets	See above.

	Market Vital	Definition <i>Per Season</i>	How Vital Can Be Used	How It Can Be Collected
4	Total # of Vendors	Total # of all vendors/season who have sold at the market at least once during the season.	Shows growth of markets, and farmers market "industry" as a whole; can help market the market to vendors, funders and sponsors; and build community support.	See above.
5	Total # of Farm Vendors	Total # of all farms/season who have sold at the market at least once during the season.	Quantifies the market's ability to offer sales opportunities for farmers and support for small businesses.	Vendor database.
6	Total "Vendor Days" for the Season	Number of vendors selling on each market day, totaled for the season.	Shows total number of direct sales opportunities for small businesses provided by markets each season.	
7	Total "Farmer-Vendor Days" for the Season	Number of farmer-vendors selling on each market day, totaled for the season.	Shows total number of direct sales opportunities for farm businesses provided by markets each season.	
8	Market Staff	Total # of jobs and hours worked per season for staff (including anyone paid by market):	Jobs show economic impact/development; helps to monitor sustainability of market.	Timesheets; contracts; volunteer sign in sheets.
		a. Full-time, year round staff		
		b. Part-time, year round staff		
		c. Full-time, seasonal staff		
		d. Part-time, seasonal staff		
9	Market Volunteers	# of individual volunteers per season (even if only volunteered one day) AND total volunteer hours per season.	To show how markets depend on volunteers, show capacity, and show community commitment.	See above.
10	EBT \$	Total SNAP dollars redeemed at the market (per definition).	Marketing the market; tracking success of changes and new programs; increasing community awareness of low-income needs; positioning market vis-a-vis community food security projects (and funding); communicating with state agencies and other food assistance advocates; building alliances with anti-hunger coalitions.	Tracked by DSHS; however that data is not publically available.
11	FMNP: WIC & Senior	Farmers Market Nutrition Program dollars redeemed at market for the season (per state definition).		Tracked by the Department of Health. A report by County is shared.
12	Food Bank Donations	Total pounds donated to food bank(s) by market per market season.		Add to vendor market day report form; ask food bank if they can help track pounds (if not doing so already).