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**A Needs Assessment for Farmers' Markets:
A Survey of Market Managers**

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The number of farmers' markets in New York continues to grow but some have struggled or floundered after their initial establishment. For this reason Cornell Cooperative Extension offices in a 10-county region in Western New York initiated a project to study various factors that might contribute towards this instability.

The objective of this study was to identify challenges faced by the market managers. Gaining a better understanding of these challenges could provide a foundation for developing tools and educational resources that would help market organizers establish successful markets. These tools could help create stable, profitable and successful markets and thereby provide a viable sales channel for local farmers.

This study began in November 2012 with a total of 64 farmers' markets scattered across a nine-county region called the Genesee Valley Region comprised of Genesee, Livingston, Monroe, Ontario, Orleans, Steuben, Wayne, Wyoming and Yates with one additional county outside the region – Seneca County. A questionnaire was developed in collaboration with the Farmers' Market Federation of New York.

Given the geographic scale, the questionnaire was administered via phone interviews. Contacting the managers was challenging due to their busy schedules, and several attempts were needed to reach them. The duration of the interview averaged about 45 minutes; the shortest lasted 15 minutes and the longest 3 hours! We did not limit the interview time.

At the end of each survey, the manager was asked to evaluate the overall performance of their market, using a 1 - 10 scale, with 1 being the lowest and 10 the highest performance. Although this is a subjective measure of success, market managers are in a position to have in-depth knowledge of the market and its operations and can be experts in assessing their market performance. Because this rating is of particular interest, we gave it a name, the 'rating value'.

The Results

Length of Service: Being a good farmers' market manager takes a combination of skills and talents. An inexperienced or incompetent manager can be a leading factor in the success or failure of a

market. Since it takes time to build expertise, we assume that length of service might be one measure of a manager’s proficiency.

Table 1. Average Length of Service of Market Managers

County	Average Length of Service (years)	Average Age of Market (years)
Genesee (n=4)	4.5	15.3
Livingston (n=5)	5.3	15.2
Monroe (n=14)	5.8	13.4
Ontario (n=9)	4.3	11.2
Orleans (n=0)	n/a	n/a
Seneca (n=1)	5.0	10.0
Steuben (n=4)	4.0	10.8
Wyoming (n=0)	n/a	n/a
Wayne (n=5)	3.6	14.7
Yates (n=4)	5.8	14.6
Grand Average (46)	4.8	13.2

Note: The missing data were due to manager inaccessibility.

The average length of service was 4.8 years. Given that the average number of years in operation of our markets was 13.2, we can say on average that each market has had two to three managers to date.

Compensation: Running a farmers’ market requires time and energy. It was of interest to find out how managers were compensated for their efforts.

Our findings show that a majority of managers, 70%, were uncompensated. Only 23% were paid. The remaining 7% were given non-monetary rewards such as free market baskets or gift certificates at the end of the season. Of the 23% who received monetary compensation, 15% worked through a temporary, year-to-year contract and 85% held a part-time or full-time position.

Table 2. Market Manager’s Compensation

Compensation	Number of managers	Percentage	‘Rating value’
Uncompensated	40	70	6.18
Non-monetary compensation	4	7	8.00
Paid	13	23	7.98
Total	57	100	

On average, the markets with paid managers and those receiving non-monetary compensation did show higher ‘rating values’ than the markets with unpaid managers.

Level of Experience: Running a farmers market, helping it grow, making it profitable, and assuring that it has a sustainable future, is a tall order! Hence, it is most beneficial if market organizers are familiar with event running and have management skills. Such skills, perhaps learnt from previous jobs or volunteer activities, prove valuable during routine, day-to-day market operations, as well as during more challenging times when critical thinking and quick decisions are required.

If they lack experience, then networking and learning from more seasoned market managers can be very beneficial. Experience and networking together can increase a manager’s effectiveness.

We enquired whether the manager had experience organizing farmers markets or organizing events in general prior to starting their markets or stepping into the manager’s job. Table 3 shows that 31% of managers had prior experience and also engaged in networking activities. Another quarter or 25% had past experience with event management only while 19% were inexperienced but learnt via networking. Another quarter (25%) had neither experience nor networking activities. They ran their markets as best as they could.

Table 3. Market Manager’s Level of Experience and ‘Rating Value’

Attributes	Number of managers	Percentage	‘Rating value’
Both past experience and networking efforts	18	31	7.0
Past experience only	14	25	6.0
Networking effort only	11	19	6.3
Neither past experience nor networking efforts	14	25	5.2
Total	57	100	

Table 3 also shows the average ‘rating value’ for each level of manager attributes. The success and stability of a farmers’ market may be very dependent on the level of experience the manager has.

Organizational Structure: Markets have adopted an assortment of organizational structures from very formal to very informal. Using the data from the survey, three market structures were identified and used for analysis of management structure. These were markets run by a board of directors, a loosely formed group, or a single market manager.

Table 4. Market Organizational Structure and ‘Rating Value’

Organizational structure	Number of markets	Percentage	‘Rating value’
Single manager	23	40	5.1
Loosely joined	15	25	6.0
Board of directors	20	35	6.9
Total	58	100	

Our data show that the most common market organizational structure is single manager operators (40%). Perhaps making decisions ‘on your own’ might bring certain advantages like simplicity and rapid implementation of change. But many dangers outweigh this advantage. Inexperience or low level of diplomacy skills can cause problems through the entire course of market operation. An inexperienced and low diplomacy skill manager can jeopardize the relationship between market participants, affecting different aspects of market management such as vendor retention, rule enforcement, building community connections, fund raising, etc. This can negatively affect the market’s performance.

A quarter of our markets were organized by loosely formed groups. Again, the members’ collaboration can be formal or informal, but in either case this set-up offers a better job distribution. Sharing responsibilities, exchanging ideas, and solving problems jointly can be easier than for a single market manager.

Only 35% of markets operated with a board of directors. But those had the advantage of combining wider skills sets and expertise, helping managers and the market face challenges and barriers.

Markets organized by single managers only had the lowest average 'rating value'. Markets with a board of directors had the highest rating.

These results and others included in the full project report will guide the development of future training programs for market managers, for farmers' markets governing institutions, and for community development agencies. A copy of the full report will be available soon from Cornell Cooperative Extension of Wayne County.

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