

Contextualizing Farmers' Market Needs: Assessing the Impact of Community Type on Market Management

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Abstract

While the number of farmers' markets has exponentially increased in the United States, many of these markets are at risk of failure without adequate support and technical assistance. Based on 17 interviews with Wisconsin farmers' market managers, this paper reflects on the differences in infrastructure issues, data collection activities, and stakeholder relationships of markets situated in varying community types (metropolitan, micropolitan, suburban, and rural). Findings suggest that technical assistance should be better tailored to meet the needs of markets based in these distinct community settings. Peer-to-peer learning networks are suggested to better cross-pollinate ideas between markets of similar size and geography.

Keywords: farmers' markets, geographic location, market management, rural community development, urban community development

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Introduction

In search of higher-quality food and connections to farms, U.S. consumers have become more interested in purchasing locally grown products. Between 1992 and 2015, direct-to-consumer food purchases increased over 300% to reach \$3 billion in sales (Low and Vogel, 2011; USDA, 2016a). One of the key avenues for accessing local food are farmers' markets, which accounted for 23% of all direct-to-consumer sales in 2015, totaling \$711 million (USDA, 2016a). From 2006 to 2016, the number of farmers' markets voluntarily self-reporting to the USDA's National Farmers Market Directory doubled from 4,385 to more than 8,669 (USDA, 2016c).¹

Consumer demand does not appear to be the sole reason that communities start or sustain farmers' markets. Kloppenburg et al. (2000) found that efforts to implement farmers' markets are grounded in a variety of social, economic, and ecological goals. Farmers' markets have the ability to foster community engagement and develop new social ties for farmers and customers alike (Hinrichs, 2000; Lyson, 2007; Bubinas, 2011). Farmers' markets can also have a positive impact on food access and health by facilitating increased consumption of less-processed foods and fresh fruits and vegetables (Larsen and Gilliland, 2009; Landis, LaBarre, and Day, 2011; Jilcott Pitts et al., 2014). Selling products at farmers' markets has supported better financial returns for producers (O'Neill, 1997; Conner et al., 2010; Feenstra et al., 2003; Hinrichs, Gulespie, and Feenstra, 2004; Morales, 2009) in addition to generating a ripple effect on the local economy. In fact, both Lev and Stephenson (2002) and Bubinas (2009, 2011) found that farmers' markets spur spending at downtown centers, which increases sales at nearby establishments like retail stores, restaurants, and museums. Hunt (2007) also found that the social relationships developed between farmers and customers at farmers' markets can encourage more environmentally sustainable farming practices, such as reduced application of chemicals to crops.

With the influx of new farmers' markets, however, it is critical to understand the kinds of challenges that farmers' market managers experience. Even while the country has seen a net increase in new farmers' markets, many new markets fail after only 1–4 years in operation (Stephenson, Lev, and Brewer, 2008). While farmers' markets may support more sustainable communities, more research and resources are needed to build farmers' markets that are themselves more sustainable. In particular, our research explores whether farmers' markets that exist in areas of different population densities (metropolitan, micropolitan, suburban, and rural, referred to hereafter as "community type") face different challenges regarding infrastructure and relationships with key stakeholders.

Little research has focused specifically on the role that community type plays in the viability of farmers' markets, though recent studies have cited the role that geographic location plays in the effectiveness of marketing strategies and the overall longevity of farmers' markets (Oberholtzer and Grow, 2003; Stephenson, Lev, and Brewer, 2008; Barham and Coleman, 2011; Witzling, Shaw, and Trechter, 2016). This line of inquiry is particularly important because—if markets in different community types face different challenges—current markets may not be receiving adequate technical assistance without more appropriately tailored resources and training.

¹ Market managers voluntarily submit market information to the USDA's National Farmers Market Directory, which should not be taken as a true census of market growth over time.

There are many valuable resources for farmers' market managers, including comprehensive guides (Farmers' Market Federation of New York, 2010; Idaho State Department of Agriculture, 2014) and marketing support (Krowkowski and Gaouette, 2009; Cowee, Curtis, and Gatzke, 2010; Fagin, 2010; Newvine, 2013; Alvarez, Knights, and Newvine, 2014). Recently, researchers have also developed resources to guide data collection strategies at farmers' markets, since the extent to which markets collect and analyze data can also impact their relationships with market stakeholders and overall market sustainability (Lev, Stephenson, and Brewer, 2007; Market Umbrella, 2010; Vancity Community Foundation and British Columbia Association of Farmers Markets, 2013; University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2017). However, the recommendations in such resources are not specifically geared toward markets in different geographical or community contexts. By comparing the perceptions and experiences of market managers across the rural–urban spectrum, this research explores whether farmers' market supporters need to more appropriately address the challenges in market management, promotion, and evaluation that present themselves in different community types.

Research on Market Management, Location, and Customers

Several studies on farmers' markets, while not specifically focusing on the impact of community type, have suggested that a market's setting impacts its viability. Through a survey of Oregon farmers' markets and a series of focus groups with market managers, Stephenson, Lev, and Brewer (2008) found that the major reasons that markets fail are attributable to high management turnover, low resources, small size, and inexperienced management. While their study did not explicitly explore community type, they did find that four of the nine failed markets studied were in rural settings, with just one located in a major urban center.

In another study, Lohr et al. (2011) used responses to the USDA's 2006 *National Farmers Market Managers Survey* (Ragland and Tropp, 2006) to visually map the average distance that vendors and customers travel to markets across the country. The mapped competition zones illustrate increased competition for vendors among markets in major metropolitan areas like Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. Because customers will generally not travel far to attend a farmers' market, the authors theorized that competition is especially high for customers in locations where markets have proliferated. While this study helped inform where markets are situated on a macro level, it did not dive into the specifics of the challenges and advantages of running a market in each type of community.

Far more research related to farmers' markets has examined customer preferences and behavior (Ruelas, 2012; Dodds et al., 2013; Rice, 2015), or has involved random sampling of respondents at the county, state, or national level (Wolf, Spittler, and Ahern, 2005; Zepeda, 2009; Conner et al., 2010). While these studies have built a foundation for understanding who generally frequents farmers' markets and why they attend, results rarely differentiate markets by community type. However, recent market research studies have suggested that community demographics impact the effectiveness of certain a farmers' market marketing approaches (Barham and Coleman, 2011; Witzling, Shaw, and Trechter, 2016).

Study Methods and Procedures

This research focused on farmers' markets in Wisconsin, which has an estimated 265 markets in operation across the state (K. Krowkowski, personal communication, July 19, 2017). In the past 2 decades, new markets have opened all around Wisconsin, not just in populous city centers. While many markets operate in urban metropolitan cores, small cities, suburbs, and rural towns host many as well (USDA, 2016b).

Our study aimed to better understand the varying needs of markets in different community types through a series of qualitative interviews with market managers around Wisconsin. Recent farmers' market research has used a similar approach of interviews or focus groups to better explore underlying issues that are often difficult to decipher by quantitative survey data alone (Oberholtzer and Grow, 2003; Stephenson, Lev, and Brewer, 2008). Approved by the UW-Madison Institutional Review Board, the research team conducted 17 semi-structured phone interviews with Wisconsin farmers' market managers or market directors, each lasting 30–120 minutes. An interview script was collaboratively developed by the research team and then refined after the initial interviews to address the key research questions. All interviews were recorded while interviewers concurrently took notes.

Table 1. Definition of Community Types

Community Type	Population Description^a
Metropolitan	>50,000
Micropolitan	10,000 to 50,000
Suburban	<10,000; within a core based statistical area ^b
Rural	<10,000; outside a core based statistical area

^a Population Descriptions derive from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's definitions for metropolitan and micropolitan areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

^b We use a core-based statistical area (CBSA) to describe areas within both metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas.

The 17 market managers interviewed were intentionally selected to reflect a range of market types. Researchers interviewed five managers from larger, metropolitan markets (over 50,000 people), four managers from smaller, micropolitan cities (10,000 to 50,000 people), four suburban managers (less than 10,000 people in a metropolitan statistical area), and four market managers in rural towns (less than 10,000 people outside a metropolitan area) (Table 1). Interviewees were also chosen to include different types of market-governance structures: market managers working for non-incorporated organizations, vendor associations, nonprofit organizations, municipalities, chambers of commerce, Main Street Program participants,² and downtown business improvement districts were all intentionally included in the study.

Researchers employed the grounded theory method for their qualitative data analysis, which develops theory based on systematic review of data rather than constructing a theoretical

² Main Street Program participants are organizations that receive technical assistance from the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation to plan, manage, and implement strategic development projects in downtowns and urban neighborhoods (Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, 2017).

framework prior to research (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Saldana, 2013). Market managers were asked a series of standard interview questions on their community partnerships and business sponsorships, promotional efforts and marketing strategy, and data collection and analysis activities. In addition, questions were formulated to better understand the kinds of marketing and communications assistance or resources that market managers would find useful. While all managers were asked the same set of questions, the semi-structured interview format allowed interviewers to build rapport with the interviewees and capture a richer dataset.

Once the interview phase was complete, members of the research team transcribed the audio and subsequently uploaded it into NVivo (2012) for systematic coding. In grounded theory methodology, the analysis process requires an iterative coding scheme in order to fully capture respondents' thinking and understanding of the activity. In the first cycle of coding, the researchers applied initial coding, identifying trends, patterns, and differences among the interviewee's transcripts, categorizing comments based on the key topics of conversation (descriptive coding) and actions or emotions taken in response to situations (process coding) (Saldana, 2013). A series of analytical memos was developed to describe these patterns, which were then shared and reviewed by other members of the research team prior to a second coding of the transcripts.

During the second cycle of coding, the researchers applied axial coding, in which trends and patterns are reconfigured and connected to determine the data's dominant themes. The researchers then employed theoretical coding, in which they ultimately identified the core contexts, conditions, and interactions that help to explain farmers' market managers' experiences (Richards, 2009; Saldana, 2013).

Study Results

Each market manager interviewed provided their unique experiences, innovative promotional ideas, and ongoing obstacles associated with maintaining a farmers' market in their community. While their successes and challenges varied, patterns emerged that aligned markets according to community type. The experiences of suburban and rural markets were markedly different from those shared by urban farmers' markets located in downtown micropolitan or metropolitan areas. The most distinct patterns stemmed from market characteristics, issues with physical infrastructure, data collection practices, vendor and customer relationships, and community partnerships.

Market Size, Age, and Leadership

Depending on the market's location in a metropolitan urban, micropolitan, suburban, or rural community, patterns emerged regarding the market's age, size, and organizational structure (Table 2). Although the sample size for the interviews does not allow for statistical comparisons, these patterns suggest that there may be future quantitative research opportunities to explore how geographic location influences market traits.

Researchers categorized markets into five age brackets: new (1–3 years old), young (4–6 years old), established (7–10 years), institutional (11–25 years), and historical (26+ years old).

Table 2. Characteristics by Market Community Type

	Metropolitan	Micropolitan	Suburban	Rural
Market Age				
New (1–3 years)	–	–	1	–
Young (4–6 years)	–	–	2	2
Established (7–10 years)	1	–	–	1
Institutional (11–25 years)	2	2	–	1
Historical (>26 years)	2	2	1	–
Market Size				
Micro (5–8 vendors)	–	–	–	2
Small (9–30 vendors)	–	–	2	1
Medium (31–55 vendors)	3	3	2	1
Large (>56 vendors)	2	1	–	–
Organizational structure				
501(c)3 nonprofit	3	1	1	–
Municipally run	–	–	3	–
Economic development organization ^a	1	2	–	2
Vendor association ^b	1	1	–	1
Unincorporated	–	–	–	1

^a Economic development organizations include Main Street Programs, chambers of commerce, and downtown business associations.

^b Vendor associations refer to markets where vendors had direct control of decision making in the market.

Suburban markets were predominantly new or young, aside from one outlier, a market in an inner-ring suburb that was over 100 years old. Rural markets were also predominantly younger, while micropolitan and metropolitan markets were predominantly older.

A market's size also appeared to be correlated with community type, with smaller markets found in rural and suburban communities and larger markets found primarily in more urban settings. Using the market size categories defined by Stephenson, Lev, and Brewer (2008), two rural markets were defined as micro-sized (5–8 vendors), while two suburban and one rural market fell into the small size category (9–30 vendors). Medium-sized markets (31–55 vendors) were the most common in the study, which included two suburban, one rural, three micropolitan, and three metropolitan markets. There were three large markets (56+ vendors), one micropolitan and two metropolitan.

Our study's patterns of market age and size categorized by community type suggest that rural and suburban markets may be more susceptible to instability. Stephenson, Lev, and Brewer (2008) found that younger, smaller markets are more likely to fail. Many rural and suburban market managers also mentioned manager turnover as a significant concern, which Stephenson, Lev, and Brewer (2008) found to be another indicator of instability. Two suburban markets were in the process of hiring a new market manager, while another had hired a new manager within the last year. Of the rural markets, three of the four market managers were in the process of retiring from their positions. "It's not like there's a large group of people who have been farmers' market managers," said a southeastern Wisconsin manager of a suburban market, who had just

left her position. “It’s hard to say that the person that they find to replace me will even have a background in market management. I’ll be around to help train them with some of it, but still, they’re going to have to start all over.”

Manager turnover was also mentioned as an issue in micropolitan and metropolitan markets. One micropolitan market director interviewed was in the process of hiring a new manager, while another manager at a metropolitan market left her position in the months after being interviewed for this research. Two of the metropolitan managers had less than two seasons of experience working at their market organization, but both had prior farmers’ market management experience before transitioning to their current roles. Rather than suggesting that market management turnover is not a problem in more urban locations, there is a stronger suggestion that all markets are susceptible to manager turnover, with rural and suburban markets being potentially more prone to such disruptions.

In addition to market size and age, comparing market organizational structure across community types also yielded interesting patterns. In metropolitan markets, three out of five interviewed were 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations whose main missions were to organize farmers’ markets. Only one of the four suburban markets was incorporated as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. Likewise, just one micropolitan market in the study was managed by a nonprofit, but that organization ran a series of other community initiatives in addition to the farmers’ market. Similarly, two of the rural markets were run by nonprofit organizations that focused more broadly on community economic development. The specialization of urban farmers’ market organizations in market management may imply a difference in capacity and capability among those in metropolitan communities compared to other community types.

In suburban communities, three of the four markets in the study were organized by municipalities (two under the Parks and Recreation Department, and one under the Public Health Department), whereas none of the other markets in other community types was managed directly by a government entity. Due to weaker nonprofit support in suburban communities (Kneebone and Berube, 2013), local government may currently play a more important role in managing markets in this type of community.

Infrastructure

The type of community in which a market is organized also factored into the kinds of issues market managers experienced regarding physical infrastructure. Overall, parking was the greatest infrastructure concern shared by urban markets. A metropolitan market manager in south-central Wisconsin noted that

Parking is the big challenge with the downtown market because it’s expensive and often far away to park. So then, we have this message that we want you to come grocery shop, and fill up your canvas bags, and maybe buy a pumpkin that weighs 25 pounds—but, oh yeah, you get to schlep it five blocks to your car, for \$8.00 in a ramp!

Not surprisingly, concerns about parking were largely absent from interviews with rural and suburban market managers. However, at least one suburban market voiced transportation concerns as a barrier to customer attendance. “The infrastructure is more difficult. We’re not on a bus line,” she explained. “We’re kind of isolated by some farms.” So, even while parking was not an issue for this suburban market, the manager believed the lack of public transit posed a challenge for encouraging more customers to shop.

Data Collection Practices

Another area in which market managers differed by community type was in their data collection practices. In rural and suburban communities, farmers’ market managers did not tend to see the need for data collection or the potential role it could play in sustaining their operations. The rationale used by market managers for not collecting data was a belief that this practice was more suitable for markets trying to generate some financial gain or profit. The manager of a rural market in southwestern Wisconsin explained, “It’s not a money maker. It’s simply to provide fresh vegetables and produce and to bring people to town.” This sentiment was echoed by a suburban market manager in southeastern Wisconsin.

Even suburban markets operated by government entities did not see the need to collect data or track information. “We have not done any data collection, at all, through the years,” noted the manager of a municipally run suburban market in southeastern Wisconsin. “Any staff time I put in, we really do not track that, nor do we track the registration time of our staff. We haven’t been doing that. We kind of felt it was a service to the community.”

In addition, market managers actively questioned the purpose of collecting this data for their markets. The potential return on their investment of time and money for data collection activities was unclear to many rural and suburban market managers. A rural market manager in north-central Wisconsin remarked, “I don’t know if it’s better to use [money] for advertisements to let more people know that we’re there or to pay somebody to track how many people *don’t* show up [laughing].” Rural and suburban market managers perceived that the scale of their communities did not necessarily warrant systematic, quantitative analysis. Rather, managers believed that the feedback they could gather informally from vendors and community members was sufficient to provide them with insights for market decision making.

In contrast to their rural and suburban counterparts, urban markets were more likely to collect data on market activities. The manager of a large, urban market in south-central Wisconsin said, “I would say that we have pretty robust data collection in terms of how the market itself is performing... Looking at how many vendors we have, how close we are to capacity, and tracking both annual and seasonal variation of that.” More than one urban manager contextualized their data collection activities by noting the need to fulfill requirements by market funders, especially those supporting farmers’ market access for low-income families. While not all micropolitan and metropolitan markets equally believed in the utility of collecting data, there was a general acceptance among more urban markets that data collection was a necessary part of their work.

Relationship Dynamics with Vendors

Depending on the market's geographical location, market managers also experienced different issues and opportunities regarding vendor recruitment, selection, and retention. In rural and suburban markets, managers generally struggled to recruit and retain vendors. Meanwhile, managers in urban areas had to consider procedures for managing vendor waitlists.

All rural market managers interviewed expressed concerns about aging vendors at their markets and what would happen to their market operations as more and more vendors retired. A market manager in northern Wisconsin said,

A lot of our farmers are in their 60s and 70s. We had a couple who retired last year—we lost one of our great farmers who just decided to hang it up. We live in a different world than Madison, Central, or even Wausau. We have to work with those situations as best as we can.

While the reality of aging farmers was mentioned by urban market managers as a general societal issue, rural managers expressed a more immediate challenge in terms of losing these vendors and having few choices for replacing them. Finding new vendors, of any age, to fill booth slots was a substantial challenge for rural and suburban market managers.

Indeed, a major aspect of the role of market managers in small towns and suburbs is on vendor recruitment. To that end, rural and suburban market managers expressed how marketing efforts needed to serve a dual purpose in both attracting new customers as well as attracting new vendors. The shortage of vendors also affected the ways in which rural and suburban market policies were implemented or the kinds of requests managers felt comfortable making of their vendors. "I mean, we're very much at the mercy of keeping vendors interested in participating because it's not exactly a market they're going to get rich at," said a market manager in north-central Wisconsin. "You know, there's no waiting list for vendors to participate."

In urban markets, by contrast, market managers appeared to maintain more power in their relationships with vendors. One of the urban market managers interviewed was in the unique position of having run a suburban market before moving into her current management role. "[The urban market] does a pretty good job of filling up itself," she said. "It was *very* interesting coming into this market because the acceptance was just so different from my experience at [a nearby suburban market] where, at the beginning of the season, anyone who applied we found a spot for." When there are more vendors vying to sell at the market, managers have the ability to set restrictions on what can be sold and make more deliberate, consumer-centric choices for new vendors based on the market's needs.

Maintaining a vendor waitlist, however, brings its own unique challenges for urban market managers. When farmers' markets can afford to be more selective with regard to vendors, they often develop more formal rules and procedures to enforce policies like requiring that all vendors produce what they sell. Many of the urban managers were struggling to ensure that all farmers complied. "It would be wonderful to have more time and resources to do more vendor vetting and farm inspections," confided a metropolitan farmers' market manager in western Wisconsin.

“It’s something that comes up so often, and I don’t know how anybody does it given the time we usually have as managers. But, you know, just to kind of improve the integrity of the market.”

Relationship Dynamics with Customers

Just as the relationships with vendors differ depending on community type, so too do the ways in which markets relate to their customers. For rural and suburban markets, the majority of managers interviewed explained their desire to grow their customer base. When asked what they wanted the market to look like in 5 years, market managers shared a similar vision: more vendors and more customers. One director of a suburban market in south-central Wisconsin said, “Well I’d love to see a booming market, 20 vendors with a waiting list, and 500 people there every day. That’s a big dream of mine.”

Rural and suburban markets felt caught in a perpetual cycle of not having the appropriate vendor mix to attract more customers, while simultaneously not being able to attract a diverse set of vendors due to low customer attendance. Several market managers described this as the “chicken-and-egg” dilemma. “That was certainly the challenge the first couple of years, the chicken and the egg of you’ve got to have the farmers to get the customers, but you’ve got to get the customers to keep the vendors,” a rural market manager in north-central Wisconsin explained.

Downtown urban markets were less likely to express the same desire to grow in size and customer base. “Physically, we’re where we’d like to be. We always say bigger isn’t always better,” one urban market manager in northeast Wisconsin said.

Rather than seeking a larger customer base, micropolitan and metropolitan market managers were more often looking for strategies to encourage existing customers to spend more per visit on market products. One downtown metropolitan market manager in south-central Wisconsin explained, “We are really in the position where we don’t want to attract more people to the market—it’s like wall-to-wall bodies. We want the people that come to the market to buy more.” Urban managers who felt satisfied with the number of customers they had were looking to focus their marketing plans more strategically on certain demographics who they believed would spend more money. They were generally more wary of attracting out-of-town tourists and, instead, looked to target people who would use the market to engage in more substantial grocery shopping.

This does not mean that managers were only looking for patrons with higher incomes. Rather, many market managers noted that food access was an underlying goal for their market. In particular, managers recognized the power that food assistance programs have in both supporting farmers and in getting fresh, healthy products to people who are most in need. However, markets in all geographies cited having trouble attracting more people to use their Food Share program vouchers; Women, Infants and Children (WIC) vouchers; or electronic benefits transfer (EBT) cards at the market.

Managers were even struggling to increase participation in “double dollars” programs, which double the face value of food assistance vouchers for purchases made at farmers’ markets. Depending on the community type, however, managers attributed the problem to different

reasons. Urban market managers felt that they needed to develop stronger marketing and outreach campaigns to inform community members about how shoppers could use these benefits at farmers' markets. One urban market manager in northeast Wisconsin noted,

Our [EBT] sales are down 50% from what they were last year. So, I don't know if there's a perception there that the farmers' market is too overpriced, or if they're just unaware that it's available at the farmers' market. We're working on different ways with our local community organizations and churches to see about getting that word out.

But in a small-town market setting, the manager of a rural market that offered foodshare and EBT use to customers believed it was the lack of anonymity, as opposed to a lack of awareness, that was predominantly keeping users away. He said,

I've been struggling trying to find another small-town market that's had success with [EBT]... I don't know if setting up another SNAP/EBT machine where they can buy tokens somewhere else off-site, so they're not standing at a big sign, being identified at the market—it's one of the things that larger cities, or larger towns don't have to worry quite as much about—you know, being identified.

More research is needed on how farmers' markets, especially within rural or small-town settings, can overcome the perceived social stigma that EBT users experience when purchasing items.

Partnerships with Community

The challenges and opportunities for partnerships with community organizations, neighborhood associations, businesses, and government were even more fragmented by community type.

In suburban communities, market managers brought up feelings of being isolated from community activity in ways that made it more difficult to establish partnerships. “[Our town] is a really nice area, but we don't necessarily have the same strong sense of community that some of the inner city markets might, that they can pull upon,” said a suburban market manager in southeastern Wisconsin. Without as many community groups working on food security or economic development, farmers' market managers in suburban settings can lack the network necessary to support market programming and promotional efforts.

Unlike those in suburban locations, managers in urban locations cited community partnerships as one of their biggest strengths. The ecology of businesses, food-related nonprofit organizations, and civic groups nurture urban farmers' markets in ways that suburban markets may not be able to achieve.

Farmers' markets in small, rural communities shared sentiments that had more in common with urban than suburban markets. The strong social fabric and intimacy of their towns helped support and sustain their market operations. One rural market manager in north-central Wisconsin, for example, had served in the chamber of commerce and played in the same basketball league as

some of the farmers who vend at the market. He attributed much of the farmers' market success to personal relationships cultivated through other local institutions and organizations.

Whether collaborating with the chamber of commerce or a local business, rural markets strongly valued these partnership opportunities and welcomed ways to cross-promote with coinciding events. For example, a farmers' market manager in rural northern Wisconsin found success in advertising the market alongside special events like the town's Pow Wow Days and annual Frog Jumping Contest.

Larger communities did not always view these cross-promotional opportunities so positively. Rather, market managers voiced concerns that concurrent events could interfere with the market and clog downtown areas, making it more difficult for regular market attendees to purchase their groceries. "The biggest concern that we have is people seeing the 2,000 to 3,000 people coming to our farmers' market and saying, 'How do I get a piece of that action?'" said a micropolitan market manager in central Wisconsin. More-rural markets welcomed cobranding, but those in larger city centers felt threatened by cross-promotion, or at least did not perceive significant benefits.

Discussion

Researchers set out to understand whether a farmers' market's community type influences its needs and challenges with respect to market management, promotion, and evaluation. From market managers' interview responses, it is clear that community type plays a significant role in perceived barriers to market success and long-term sustainability. Depending on a market's location, market managers experienced varying challenges with parking and public transit connectivity; had different attitudes about data collection; and related to their vendors, consumers, and community partnerships in distinct ways. The results of the study have implications for how academic institutions, nonprofit organizations, Extension educators, state agencies, municipalities, and other local food supporters can better support farmers' markets.

Where appropriate, resources and technical assistance should be tailored to community types in ways that adequately address local contexts. For rural and suburban markets, supporters should provide assistance for market managers looking to overcome the "chicken-and-egg" dilemma of attracting more vendors and customers, especially in fostering the young and beginning farmers that are so necessary to keeping small-town markets in existence. Extension offices and other technical assistance providers can support the viability of markets in their communities by facilitating beginning farmer apprenticeships, for example, and connecting new farmers with specific local markets. To better deal with high turnover between market managers, assistance providers can also share guidance on developing successful transition processes for market management.

Resources and support to help market managers overcome feelings of isolation might also improve market sustainability, particularly for suburban markets. Extension offices serving suburban areas can play a critical role by more closely partnering with those markets and introducing them to regional food system partners. Municipalities or metropolitan planning

organizations proposing new public transit routes can also play a more supportive role by considering how bus lines can improve access to farmers' markets.

For both micropolitan and metropolitan markets, technical assistance and support should focus on helping markets manage vendor policies and monitor activities, something that many of the urban market managers struggled to accomplish. Technical assistance providers can specifically help disseminate model vendor application and agreement forms, farm inspection documents, and manageable enforcement and auditing procedures. The focus of assistance can also be redirected from growing the number of customers to helping increase customer expenditures.

In terms of community partnerships, urban market managers need support to build more strategic relationships to nearby community groups, conduct outreach about food assistance programs, and determine the effect of cobranded events on market sales. Data collection and visualization can help establish, build, and analyze the effectiveness of these relationships. Measuring the economic impact of the farmers' market on surrounding businesses can also be useful in making the case for their financial support. With reliable data and powerful infographics, farmers' markets may also be able to more successfully partner with city governments to address parking and public transit issues. For example, demonstrating a market's positive impact on other downtown businesses may convince a local government to provide free access to municipal parking lots during farmers' market hours.

For markets in every community context, peer-to-peer learning networks between markets of similar geography and size would provide a more appropriate community of practice for market managers to cross-pollinate ideas and glean best practices. Of the 17 market managers interviewed, 12 voiced interest in more opportunities to network, learn, and collaborate with other market managers. While there are already efforts to connect farmers' markets across the state, trainings or gatherings for markets of a certain geographic type may prove more beneficial.

The emerging themes found among markets of similar community types included in this study may not necessarily hold true for markets in other regions. Furthermore, the market managers of each category who agreed to participate in the interview process may not necessarily be representative of other market managers in similar geographic contexts. In particular, more variation may exist among metropolitan markets, as the study predominantly included representatives of centrally located downtown markets over markets located in more residential urban neighborhoods. While four markets located in residential urban neighborhoods were contacted for an interview, their lack of response to an interview inquiry may speak to their more limited capacity compared to downtown market organizations.

To that end, further research into how community type affects a market's operation would provide market managers and their technical assistance providers with more appropriate promotional and organizational strategies for success. The field of farmers' market research would especially benefit from deeper inquiries into the interplay between community type and market size, market age, and organizational structure—all factors that have been shown to have an impact on farmers' market viability (Stephenson, Lev, and Brewer, 2008). The patterns that emerged in this study regarding market characteristics and geographical context also warrant more quantitative review across a broader geographic scope, as this work focused solely on

Wisconsin communities. In addition, future research might specifically assess the efficacy of community-specific, peer-to-peer learning initiatives and their ability to help markets reach goals or resolve problems.

Conclusion

Farmers' markets are valuable community assets with the potential to strengthen economic, social, and ecological sustainability in communities of all sizes. As the number of markets increases around the country, supporters of local food systems and farmers' markets play a critical role in helping these operations thrive in their different geographical contexts and community types. While prior research into promoting and supporting farmers' markets has yielded insights into general customer preferences and management best practices, little attention has been paid to how the type of the community affects markets' opportunities for and barriers to success.

The results of our qualitative interviews with farmers' market managers in different geographies around Wisconsin allow us to start the conversation about how community context plays a role in farmers' market management. Depending on whether a market was rural, suburban, micropolitan, or metropolitan, the markets studied had varying descriptive characteristics, infrastructure issues, data collection practices, and community partnerships.

Based on the nuances of market management shared among markets of similar geographic context, there is a need for resources, programming, and technical assistance tailored to markets in each community type. In addition, peer-to-peer networks that create a community of practice for markets in similar geographic settings are highly recommended to provide more effective technical assistance. Indeed, markets across all geographic types have demonstrated that they can be sustainable operations that support farmers, community members, and local economies. With more customized technical assistance, farmers' market advocates can better help rural, suburban, micropolitan, and metropolitan markets thrive and continue to benefit farmers and their communities.

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