

Great Falls Original Farmer's Market

Best Practices

Good vendors make a good Market and excellent vendors make an excellent Market. Customers will evaluate you based on four attributes – your products, your booth, your story, and you as an individual. With those thoughts in mind, we have put together these “Vendor Best Practices” to help you become an excellent vendor.

Products

To attract customers based on your products, you must know what your customers want. Are they looking for unique specialty or ethnic items? Are they shopping for bulk produce to can or preserve or are they shopping for their weekly meal plan?

Produce vendors can manage the seasonality of their produce by planting some crops in succession so they will be available for the longest time possible. Consumers want to find the same things at the Market every week so this will create repeat customers. It is also important to manage customers' expectations of product availability. Providing a brochure or posting a chart indicating when items will be available throughout the season is one way to do this.

Be able to clearly communicate why your product is better than the typical store-bought product. Is it unique, custom-made, handcrafted from local materials, does your produce include unique varieties, how fresh is it, grown without chemicals, etc.

Sampling

Sampling can be a great marketing tool, especially if you are offering a new product. However, there are some very strict health department regulations when offering food samples. Be sure to check with the City-County Health Department before offering any food samples at the Market.

Packaging

How you package your products can have an impact on how well they sell. For produce and baked goods, be sure to contact the City-County Health Department regarding packaging regulations.

For non-food items, be sure your packaging enhances the look of your product. Visual appeal is important. For example, if you are selling fresh flowers, tying a bouquet with a simple ribbon will add more visual appeal than just using a rubber band. If you have a product that isn't selling, don't give up on it. Try new, different, or unique packaging to change the visual appeal or combine several items together as a “gift” package.

Product Display

Make sure your display makes your products easy to see without needing to stand directly above them. If you have products in containers, try putting them at a 30-40 degree angle for easier visibility. Be sure to keep containers full. If you are running out of an item, try placing the product in a smaller container. Customers like to feel that they can come back for more of your product at a later time, but if they think you are running out of a product they may look elsewhere when they need additional products.

Make sure your display is organized in a logical manner with similar products together, making it easy for customers to find what they want. Using highly visible price tags is also a good idea. Many shoppers will browse the Market and do some comparison shopping before they buy and if prices are not visible, they may not stop and ask. Use price tags that have a consistent look and feel and if you have items priced by both the pound and by the piece be sure that your price tags are very clear. And, if you want repeat customers, don't forget to put your contact information on your merchandise or include a business card in the bag with the customer's purchase.

Booth Design

Each vendor wants their booth to stand out from others. Be creative with your display and signage. Simple things like a brightly colored sign will help people remember and locate you from week to week. Be creative! If you sell lavender products, consider a purple canopy.

Your booth needs to be inviting and welcoming. Your tables don't have to be at the front of the booth, but there must be plenty of space for customers to browse through your products and for you to assist customers while still keeping an eye on your merchandise.

Keep your booth organized at all times. Use one theme for displaying your products (i.e. all baskets or crates, red and white checkered fabrics, etc.). This will help your booth look tidy. Put empty boxes back in your vehicle or under your table (if the tablecloth is long enough to hide them). If you are sampling, have garbage cans out for the toothpicks or sample cups.

Telling Your Story

Signage at your booth is your opportunity to tell the story of your operation. Knowing the producer or craftsperson and the story behind what you do is one of the key decision-making factors for consumers. Consider creating a small brochure that tells your story and what makes your merchandise unique. Include some expert tips or a recipe (if you are a food vendor) so that the customer will want to take your brochure home.

The Vendor

Vendors should have a nice, clean appearance. If you are dirty, consumers will presume your merchandise is also. If there are multiple sellers at your booth consider wearing matching shirts or caps to give a unified appearance. This also helps your booth look attractive and is another way for shoppers to distinguish you from other vendors. Wearing a name tag also adds a personal touch and can make the customer feel like they are buying from a friend rather than a stranger.

Vendors should be standing at their booths (not sitting), and should be alert to the customer's needs. While at the Market the customer is the number one priority. Vendors should not be eating while attending to customers. At all costs, avoid making the customer feel like they are being a bother. If the vendor has small children at the Market, it would be helpful to have an attendant to watch them so that customer service doesn't suffer.

Customer service is another quality that sets farmers' markets apart from other retail outlets. Use eye contact and a smile to acknowledge every customer that approaches your booth. When possible, engage them in conversation asking them about their tastes and preferences, learn their

children's names, and remember the information they share. Although misbehaving children can be a problem, you can easily lose a customer for good if you are rude to their children. Show customers that they are important to you, especially if you have faithful repeat customers.

Always be positive!! Don't be critical of other vendors or the market management. Explain the quality of your products without tearing down anyone else's. If you don't have a product someone is looking for, be willing to refer them to someone else at the Market.

Safety Tips

- Be aware of your surroundings and pay attention to who is coming and going.
- Get to know your neighboring vendors so you can help each other watch for and report suspicious behavior from patrons.
- Put your "cash box" in a secure area away from the public and out of sight. Using the Farmer's Market apron is a good option because it keeps your cash close to you where someone can't easily walk away with it.
- Never leave your money unattended or turn your back on your cash box. It only takes a second for a thief to pick it up and keep on walking.
- If you have a lot of cash, put some of it in a separate pocket or lock some of it out of sight in your car so that if you are the victim of theft, the thief won't get all of your money.
- Be aware of counterfeit money. If you regularly accept large bills consider using a counterfeit detection pen that can be purchased at any office supply store.
- Place expensive items in the center of your table along the back edge (or in the area of your booth that is easiest for you to watch and hardest for a thief to reach) with less expensive items towards the front and ends of the table.
- Don't put more product on the table than you can watch. When an item is sold, immediately fill the empty space with more merchandise. This makes it easier to tell if something has been stolen.
- Whenever possible have at least one other person at your booth so they can watch while you're busy with a customer, making change, taking a break, etc. Remember that every time you make change, reach for more merchandise, or bag a purchase you are taking your eyes off the customers and your table.
- If you notice a problem or suspicious behavior at your neighbor's table, let them know. You don't need to make a "scene" but if a thief knows he's being watched there's a good chance he'll just walk away empty-handed.