

# PROMOTING FARMERS MARKETS IN LOS ANGELES

RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM THE MARKET TOGETHER PROJECT

*Megan Bomba, Project Director*

*Urban & Environmental Policy Institute*

*June 2018*



Urban &  
Environmental  
Policy Institute  
OCCIDENTAL COLLEGE

# Table of Contents

- Acknowledgements..... 3
- Introduction ..... 4
- Methods..... 6
  - Vendors..... 6
  - Market Managers..... 7
  - Customers ..... 7
- Results..... 10
  - Vendor Interviews..... 10
  - Market Manager Interviews ..... 12
  - Customer Focus Groups..... 18
- Discussion..... 21
- Market Together Principles ..... 23

# Acknowledgements

This research was made possible through the support and cooperation of a network of farmers market operators and good food advocates. A special thanks to Frank Tamborello and Hunger Action LA for connecting us to the network of Market Match farmers markets in the area; Jackie Rivera-Krous and SEE-LA for their partnership in the Market Together project and cooperation with the research; Misty Iwatsu and the North Figueroa Association/Lincoln Heights Benefit Association for their partnership on the project and participation in the research; Jen and Rick Kanter of Barrio Partners for advising the research process; the Ebell Club of Highland Park, the Lincoln Heights Senior Center, and St. Athanasius Episcopal Church for hosting our focus groups; and finally a huge thank you to all of the managers and vendors at the Highland Park, Lincoln Heights, Echo Park, Hollywood, Watts, Central Ave, Crenshaw, Monterey Park, East Hollywood, Adams/Vermont, Pasadena, East Los Angeles, and Altadena farmers markets for kindly letting us interrupt their day and for participating in our research. This research was made possible through funding through the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service Farmers Market Nutrition Program.

## UEPI Staff

Megan Bomba, lead researcher and author  
Sharon Cech, editor  
Rosa Romero, focus group assistant  
Raquel Galarza, focus group assistant  
Laura Palomares, focus group assistant

## Occidental College Student Research Assistants

Maggie Smart-McCabe  
Ryder Bennell  
Diego Zapata  
Micaela Alvarez Orgambidez  
Savannah D'Orazio  
Elena Kervitsky  
Sofia Escalante  
Cynthia Magallanes-Gonzalez  
Melissa Mateo

# Introduction

This report is a compilation of research findings as part of *Market Together*, a project of the Urban & Environmental Policy Institute (UEPI) at Occidental College and funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farmers Market Promotion Program. The goal of *Market Together* is to research, pilot, and disseminate community-based strategies to improve food access and economic viability among Los Angeles farmers markets.

*Market Together* grew out of UEPI's long-standing commitment to building equity in the food system in Los Angeles as well as the emerging issue of the role of food within the context of gentrification and displacement. UEPI's history with food justice goes back to the development of Farm to School programming in the 1990s, and leadership in the effort towards the unprecedented Soda Ban in Los Angeles public schools in 2002. Since the mid-1990s, UEPI has published a Fresh Food Access Guide which directs low-income residents in Los Angeles towards sources of fresh fruits and vegetables, and created and piloted Farm to Pre-School: the first comprehensive local procurement and curriculum guide for schools and care-providers of young children. UEPI also piloted the incorporation of local fresh foods into WIC (Women Infants and Children) packages through its Farm to WIC program, and has provided research and policy recommendations locally and statewide on facilitating the acceptance of WIC vouchers at farmers markets.

In the context of Los Angeles, farmers markets are often seen as a solution to inequities in urban food access, touted as one of the solutions to food deserts and a way to benefit low-income families while supporting the local food economy. According to 2018 records from the California Department of Food and Agriculture, there are approximately 64 farmers markets in the City of Los Angeles and 169 in Los Angeles County. Given that many of these markets are located in low to mixed-income neighborhoods, making these markets accessible to low-income customers is often a high priority for farmers market operators and advocates. In 2016, the City of Los Angeles passed a resolution requiring all farmers markets operating on city property to accept CalFresh (SNAP) benefits, and an increasing number are participating in Market Match or other "nutrition incentive programs" in which qualifying customers are given up to \$10 as a "match" to their fruit and vegetable purchases using CalFresh.

These efforts and successes paint a hopeful picture; however, the reality is that the success of farmers markets and better food access is far more complex than simply establishing farmers markets and providing incentives to shop. While there are a few flagship markets with huge crowds, consistent profits for farmers, and a waitlist of potential vendors, our preliminary research and anecdotal evidence suggests that many if not most farmers markets in Los Angeles are actually struggling to cover costs, retain vendors, and attract customers. This is especially true for farmers markets in low-income neighborhoods, where there are fewer shoppers able to pay the higher price for quality produce. These markets then struggle to retain vendors, who will readily leave a market serving a low-income community for a more lucrative opportunity elsewhere. This pattern of low sales and low vendors creates a cyclical problem, since having few and erratic vendors also makes the markets less appealing,

leading again to fewer shoppers. Without the variety of product to attract enough shoppers, and without the shoppers to provide reliable sales for vendors, many markets languish in an unstable state of flux, even in a neighborhood where they fill a marked need for fresh food.

In the context of many neighborhoods today, the issue is further complicated by gentrification and displacement. In rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods, more mid- to high-income households are now making up the shopper base at farmers markets. While this influx of higher income shoppers can aid in the overall stability of the market, there is potential for farmers markets to contribute to displacement and lack of accessibility for long-time, lower-income residents. Unless farmers markets explicitly cater to the needs of long-time, lower income residents, farmers markets in gentrifying neighborhoods have the strong potential to simply leave out low-income residents and become yet another high-income amenity, rather than the important food access points that they were originally intended to be.<sup>1</sup>

*Market Together* was envisioned to address the need to create economically viable markets while maintaining accessibility within gentrifying neighborhoods through community-based marketing strategies. Specifically, *Market Together* aims to research what the barriers are for smaller, less-established farmers markets to attract customers, pilot marketing strategies to address these barriers, and disseminate the lessons learned to markets across the City and region. The hypothesis of the project is that a neighborhood-based approach—relying on partnerships and relationships with community institutions—would be an integral part of the solution to building a strong neighborhood farmers market that serves both the needs of long-time residents and local farmers.

The following report outlines the research conducted at Los Angeles farmers markets to answer this question as to why markets struggle to survive and what changes can be made to bring more community members—particularly low-income shoppers—into the market.

---

<sup>1</sup> Several interviewees for this project are long-time farmers market managers who were involved in advocating for the legislation which led to the establishment of farmers markets in California in the late 1970s and 80s. According to these managers, many of these advocates and pioneer farmers markets were started by church programs and other poverty alleviation agencies which sought to use farmers markets as a tool to alleviate hunger.

# Methods

Three distinct groups of stakeholders were identified as key to understanding barriers to market success. **1. Vendors** would be key to understanding common characteristics of vendor businesses, what factors affect why vendors choose to stay and what existing marketing is used by vendors. **2. Market managers** would be key to understanding what existing marketing strategies are employed, what competing factors and issues go into running a farmers market, and what are the manager's understanding of the goals, challenges, and purpose of the market. **3. Customers**, particularly those utilizing food assistance programs, would be key to understanding what community members are looking for in a farmers market, what factors influence why and how often people choose to shop, and what marketing and promotion efforts are most effective to customers.

Three different methods were selected to learn from each of these three groups, and included structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. In addition, two key informant interviews were conducted with market operators<sup>2</sup> which helped to determine these chosen methods. These methods were approved by the Institutional Review Board of Occidental College. Figure 1 below shows where selected markets are located and the types of research that were conducted at each one.

## Vendors

Structured interviews were chosen as the best methodology for market vendors, with the interviewer following a strict sequence of questions. This was the most appropriate method considering that vendors had to be interviewed while running their market booth and had to multi-task while participating in the interview. For this reason, busier booths or booths with only one worker present were not able to be interviewed. Despite this limitation, this method was determined to be the most effective and would get the most thorough response according to market operators and managers. Vendors were interviewed between May and June of 2017 by the UEPI Project Director and a student research assistant at the same markets selected for Market Manager interviews, described below. Vendors represented sellers of agricultural products (24), as well as prepared food (10) and craft vendors (5). It is important to note that many of the same vendors sell at multiple markets represented here. Researchers attempted to avoid duplicating vendors at different markets, however, it is important to note that vendor responses may have varied slightly depending on the market they were at that day. Vendors were asked about the nature of their businesses, the size and location of their farms (if applicable), what other sales outlets they have for their products, what how they decide to enter a new farmers market or stay at existing ones.

---

<sup>2</sup> Market operator refers to the sponsoring agency for a farmers market, as opposed to the market manager, who is typically an employee of the operating agency.

## Market Managers

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the best method for market managers, with the interviewer following a template of questions but making adjustments to the flow of questions and adding follow up questions as needed. Market managers have a wide range of backgrounds and experience, so this method was chosen as the most appropriate to capture this range of perspectives. Questions included the manager's history with the market, their responsibilities, how new vendors are recruited, the relationship with the community, and existing marketing and vendor retention strategies. Fifteen Market Managers at 13 markets were interviewed by the UEPI Project Director between May and June of 2017. These markets and managers were chosen to be interviewed based on the markets' acceptance of food assistance programs and the likelihood that the market served a low-income population. All of the markets accept CalFresh, operate a Market Match program, and are located in a mixed- to low-income neighborhood. Managers representing the 6 markets operated by project partner SEE-LA were interviewed at the SEE-LA office. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Managers at the other 7 markets were interviewed at the market during market time. These interviews were not recorded due to sound interference at the market; notes were taken by hand.

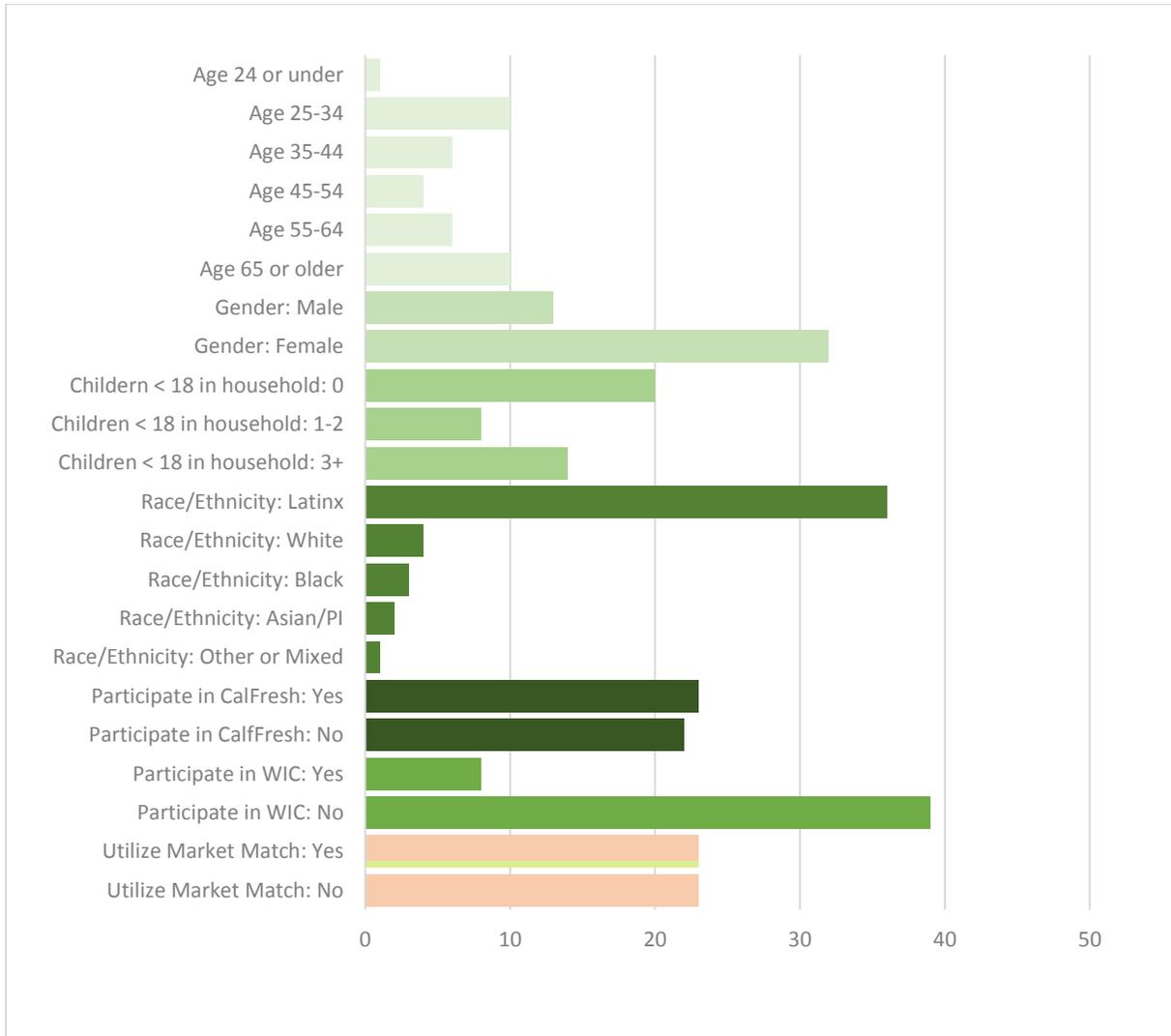
## Customers

Focus groups were selected as the best methodology for market customers, providing the greatest opportunity for in-depth responses. Since most customers might not think consciously about why they shop at the farmers market and what affects their behavior there, focus groups provided the advantage of group thought process and discussion. Focus groups were conducted in August of 2017 at 3 markets which will later serve as pilot markets for the *Market Together* strategy. These markets were chosen because the in-depth information provided by customers might inform specific components of the pilot marketing strategy, and because coordination efforts for recruitment required a closer relationship with the market manager. Focus group participants were recruited by the market manager at the information booth when customers were present to process CalFresh or other food assistance programs. At two markets, participants were also recruited during healthy recipe demonstrations run by UEPI Farm to School program staff. While participation was open to any market customer, recruitment at the information booth and recipe demonstration helped to ensure that food assistance-eligible customers would be most likely to participate. Participants were offered \$25 in market dollars as an incentive for their participation, and were asked to sign up ahead for the focus group in either English or in Spanish. Focus groups were held at locations that were walking distance from the farmers market during market time. Participants were asked about their shopping habits at the farmers market, why they choose the farmers market over other grocery shopping options, and other reasons for shopping at the farmers market. A total of 7 focus group sessions were held, detailed in Figure 2 below. Focus group participants were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire, the results of which are shown in Figure 3 below. As shown in Figure 3, the participants represented a varied age range, were comprised of more women than men, and were predominantly Latino/a. Slightly more than half of the participants participated in CalFresh, and about half reported participating in the incentive program Market Match.

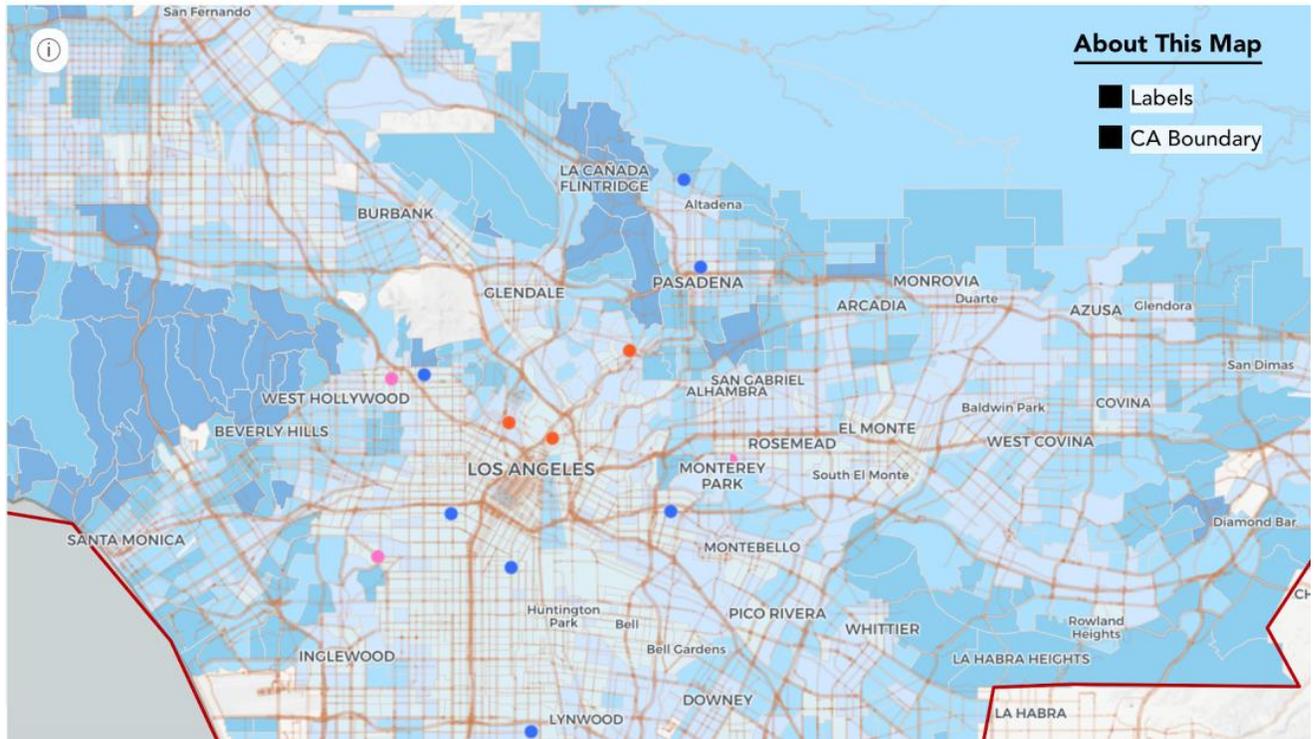
**Figure 1. Focus Group Location and Participation**

Session number	Market Location	Language	No. participants
1	Highland Park	Spanish	7
2	Lincoln Heights	Spanish	13
3	Lincoln Heights	English	5
4	Echo Park	Spanish	4
5	Echo Park	English	10
6	Echo Park	Spanish	9
7	Echo Park	Spanish	9

**Figure 2: Focus Group Demographic Data**



**Figure 3. Farmers Market Research Sites and Median Income**



**Theme** Change Data

Median income 🔗 ⓘ ⊗

10,515  241,528

---

**Filters** +

---

**Places of Interest** +

- Los Angeles County ⓘ ⊗
- ▶ Manager, Vendor and Focus Groups ⓘ 🔗 🔗 ⊗
- ▶ Manager only ⓘ 🔗 🔗 ⊗
- ▶ Manager and Vendor Surveys ⓘ 🔗 🔗 ⊗

# Results

## Vendor Interviews

Vendor interviews provided insight into the shared characteristics of farmers market vendors and what goes in to their decision making about whether to enter a new market or stay at a current one. The following summarizes commonalities in vendors' perspectives on why they stay at markets, their existing marketing strategies, and shared characteristics of their businesses for each vendor category (farmers, craft, and prepared food vendors).

### *Vendor Characteristics*

#### **Farmer vendors**

- Farms are family operations. While the market stall operator is rarely the main decision maker for the farm for obvious reasons, market workers are often co-owners or very close family members.
- Even for larger operations, workers are still most often family members, albeit distant ones. At these farms, workers may know little about the farms and have little investment.
- Farmers Markets make up the overwhelming majority of business. Restaurants also make up a portion of sales, but for many are sporadic. Very few also sell to grocery stores.
- Only one farmer interviewed was certified organic, although most also specified that they do not use chemical pesticides.

#### **Craft vendors**

- Primarily hobby business owners. They are from local community and do not care as much about their profits.

#### **Prepared food vendors**

- In addition to long time businesses, many are young businesses that are just starting out. These businesses are starting with farmers markets because they have lower overhead than other options (brick and mortar, catering, etc.).

### *Factors for Staying at Markets*

- Whether or not a market is worthwhile is an inexact science. Yes, selling at the market needs to make financial sense, but vendors rarely have exact criteria for staying at a market.
- Vendors named the atmosphere of the market, relationships to the manager, their loyal customers, and serving customers who they feel a connection with as major factors in decisions to stay or begin with a market.
- Sales fluctuate greatly throughout the year and week to week, so vendors expect that sales will vary and that many weeks will not meet their expectations for sales.

- Farmers make farmers markets their business—they are doing markets almost every day of the week, and sometimes multiple markets per day. They often think of their sales for markets collectively over the week rather than on a per market basis, as long as costs are being covered.
  - This is especially true for fruit and root vegetable growers, whose product will keep for longer periods and can be saved from one market to another.
- Selling out of product, or at least selling a significant portion of product, is as much a factor as actual dollar amount of sales.

### *Marketing Strategies*

- Farmers market vendors are not investing heavily in marketing. Most have some kind of web or social media presence, but if it exists it's not managed by the same people who are running market stalls.
- Vendors are not involved in promotion strategies for the market as a whole.

### *Vendor Interview Summary*

Farmers markets are important opportunities for vendors. Whether they are hobby businesses, start ups, or multi-generation family farms, farmers markets are often providing the only sales outlet for these businesses. Considering that farmers markets are thus relatively high stakes for these vendors, vendors seem to be mostly left out of the equation in terms of marketing and promotion. There is a missed opportunity to involve vendors in the marketing process.

## Market Manager Interviews

The manager interviews showed insight into the experience of the market manager and their perspective on what makes a market succeed or fail. While a manager’s perspective is based on their experience rather than objective facts, their opinions on vendor retention, customer needs, and general market success show how managers are approaching their challenges and what their priorities are in troubleshooting market issues. Common themes that emerged from the interviews included the importance of inter-personal relationships and the constant challenge that marketing/promotion poses due to its secondary importance to operational concerns. Major themes are summarized in terms of helpful strategies and challenges below.

### *Market Manager Challenges*

#### **1. Operations have priority**

Operational responsibilities always take precedent, often leading to lackluster marketing and outreach. When asked about their responsibilities, managers rarely lead with outreach, vendor recruitment, or market atmosphere. Managers’ primary and most essential responsibilities are the operational and administrative duties of the market: set up, take down, making sure vendors’ needs are addressed and that there are no safety concerns. There is also significant administrative work associated with managing the various food assistance programs. Managers tend to describe past marketing efforts vaguely and don’t have a strong sense of what methods are effective.

“Marketing in general when you are small tends to fall to the bottom in terms of priority.”

“I really can’t tell. Sometimes we get a crowd and we did nothing, or we walk the streets and don’t notice a difference. But I really don’t know.”

“I really don’t know. Facebook and Instagram. [Someone else] takes care of that. He’s a former student and will post things.”

#### **2. Visibility and community awareness**

All managers have a lot of conviction that location makes a huge difference, and visibility from passersby plays a huge role. Many struggling markets attribute at least some of the struggle to lack of visibility—both of the market itself as well as signage. Even visible markets also mention simple lack of community awareness of the market.

“It’s all visibility. People discover us every week, and if we were on the street it would go through the roof.”

“Whoever is running it is not putting signs up where people can see them so there’s zero advertising.”

“Poor location. It’s hidden. People down the block don’t know about us.”

### 3. Vendor and shopper expectations

---

There are so many farmers markets in LA that both shoppers and vendors can pick and choose which ones they attend. With so many options, and with a few “super-star” markets leading the way, both shoppers and vendors have high expectations for how “good” a market is. Vendors have expectations for how busy the market should be and how many sales they can make; customers have expectations for the variety of products that will be sold as well as the market atmosphere. If a market isn’t a “good” market, both vendors and community members are liable to just seek out another market or not shop at the market at all.

“As a small market manager I am really annoyed by the Hollywood-or-bust or Santa Monica-or-bust mentality when there is a lot less competition at some of these smaller markets.”

“Bigger markets can take away a vendor’s desire to be in a smaller market and furthers the cycle of no customers equals no vendors.”

“I know that they’ve come from Santa Monica or Pasadena, really big markets, and they expect the same here. It’s hard for the shoppers because they’re like, ‘where’s the guy with the tomato’s?’ We would love for them to make oodles of money, but it has to be in baby steps.”

### 4. Mixed experience with cross-promotion and engagement

---

Cross-promotion efforts and engagement with the business community also suffer from lack of strategic planning and unclear or even negative outcomes. Many managers seem to struggle with community partnerships, and sometimes even have antagonistic relationships with potential partners. The local business community in particular can have a mixed relationship with farmers markets, competing for parking or street visibility.

“We give out their info here but they don’t promote us. They come out to the market, but I think they look at us and our size and don’t think we’re relevant.”

“There is a fear of engagement with directly surrounding businesses because we don’t want them to foster a connection with us and use it to complain.”

“I had a lady come the other day and she said ‘What are you giving out for free today?’ and then when there wasn’t anything she just turned around. . . So I’m not sure how much it gets people to shop.”

## *Market Manager Elements of Success*

### **1. Quality of Fresh Produce**

---

Taste, freshness, and unique products are what motivate shoppers to spend money at the market according to managers. Managers report relying on shoppers' experience of tasting the higher quality food in order to keep them coming back. Others are able to keep and retain customers by advertising these elements to shoppers.

"Once you taste the different you get hooked. . . Once you're introduced to the good stuff you want it all the time. There's a big difference."

"Knowing that the farmers' produce is from here helps bring people. You hear walking by 'I'm so glad it's fresh produce,' or, 'I'm so happy it's freshly cooked.'"

"A lot of them will say that they feel like it is too expensive. I tell them that I understand but if you try a sample you will see that it is totally different. The produce will last longer."

### **2. Market Atmosphere**

---

Farmers markets can be place-makers, and atmosphere plays a huge role. Many managers describe their markets as "community events that happen once a week," and places where families can spend time together. The atmosphere created at the market is a huge part of what attracts people to come and stay.

"a lot of neighbors come here and this is the only time they come see their neighbors."

"Sunday sort of makes that place come alive. And the same goes for [another market]. . . Wednesday really activates that space and creates a sense of place."

"People meet each other. People have birthday parties. We just need to highlight it as a draw for families to bring their kids to get them outside."

### 3. Food assistance programs

---

Managers agree that summer WIC and Market Match play a major role in drawing the local community. The summer WIC program gives WIC participants additional checks to spend at farmers markets from May to November. Market Match gives food assistance users additional spending money on fruits and vegetables. Managers note that both programs attract members of the community who wouldn't otherwise shop at the market because of high prices.

"We will have 3 times more [customers] in the summer from the WIC program."

"WIC comes sometimes and it was crazy how big the sales would be."

"They really like using Market Match with produce. People that would not even think of spending money on apples are now doing it."

### 4. Building strong and positive relationships

---

#### *a. Manager relationship with vendors*

The relationship between a market manager and a vendor, especially a farmer, is informal and tenuous. As one manager said about recruiting farmers, "the farmers have to trust us blindly." Vendors could leave at any time--creating a supportive atmosphere where vendors feel respected and confident that the manager is looking out for them is key. How vendors *feel* at the market appears, for some, to be almost as important as their sales. Vendors are willing to stay even at slow markets if they like the "vibe" or "atmosphere" or the way the managers treat them. Manager's commitment to their vendors' happiness and satisfaction is further illustrated by managers' description of how they decide on vendor assortment: when asked how they decide on new vendors, the overwhelming first consideration was avoiding competition with existing vendors.

"It has been really important to build a good relationship with them. Once you have that they will help you, and they help me a lot."

"My MO is always to build and to maintain a community that is a happy place with good relationships."

"I hear from a lot of farmers that they like the market, the vibe of the market, so they'll go there even if they are losing money."

*b. Manager relationship with customers*

At most markets, managers have little direct interaction with customers. Managers have the most interaction with customers processing EBT, WIC, or Market Match sales. As one manager said, “We have limited engagement with them, except for when they have complaints,” as well as the general rule that “the manager doesn’t always deal with the public; they deal with the vendors and it’s the vendors that give the face to the public.” At some markets, however, managers *do* have a lot of interaction with customers, which leads to greater capacity to do word of mouth outreach. Managers impart a sense of ownership among these customers, making them feel that their support is needed in order to keep the market going.

“Talking to your customers makes them come back and that helps you maintain your vendors.”

“Talk to your customers. I feel like if you tell them what is going on at your market, and if you tell them your mission to make the community better, they will appreciate that. And if you don’t talk to them, they won’t know you and there is no connection.”

*c. Vendor relationship with customers*

Managers observe that vendors have loyal customers that come back week to week; this helps keep the vendors at the market because they have their own loyal customer base. As noted above, vendors are really the face of the market since the manager doesn’t actually have that much interaction with the customers.

“Customers notice when vendors are not there because they are loyal to their vendors.”

“They already have clientele that come every week.”

“They’ve established a relationship with the community. People know each other by name.”

d. Farmers market's relationship to the community

While some successful markets are destinations that draw food-lovers from across the region, most Los Angeles farmers markets are small and draw from the local neighborhood. In this context, farmers markets not only need to anchor themselves in the needs of the community, but also gain investment and ownership of the market by the local community. Some managers are able to impart a sense of ownership and even obligation on the part of their local community and customers, which help keep sales at a level to sustain vendors and the market as a whole. While broad marketing efforts like community-wide flyering have unknown impact, some managers maintain the importance of partnerships with particular service groups and other organizations in the neighborhood, even if these groups are not specifically promoting the market.

"I discourage people from opening new markets unless you have a specific intention for your community. . . I think that offering as much value as possible as a community event, even if the produce isn't the cheapest, is worth it."

"Farmers markets are a use it or lose it thing for community. If you don't support them, they will not be around. One week at [my market], it was a rainy day and I sent an email to our email list telling people that we needed them to be there to support and they came."

"I tell them that the market is not my market. It is your market and you decide if it shrinks or it grows. I am here to try to get more vendors, but it depends on the support of the customers."

"I reached out to community groups. Markets aren't just markets-they are also community events/community hubs."

*Market Manager Interview Summary*

The manager interviews provided tremendous insight into the challenges that farmers markets face and the potential strategies for building stronger markets. Perhaps most important is the fact that managers are dealing with a huge list of immediate, day to day challenges that take precedence over long-term marketing strategies. Managers that appear to have succeeded at engaging with their community have done so above and beyond their role as a market manager. While no manager has a clear "how-to" solution to creating a strong market, the following should be taken into account when designing a promotion strategy for farmers markets:

- Managers need a great deal of support and guidance for marketing and outreach, as it is not one of their primary responsibilities and they have little to no training or ability to measure impacts.
- Managers should further what they are already doing well in terms of building a welcoming, communal atmosphere and cultivating positive relationships with the community. These efforts should be seen as not as above and beyond, but as essential to market growth and survival.
- Gaining more ownership and investment from both the neighborhood and vendor community will help to make the market more sustainable.
- Small markets should appeal to the local neighborhood, not try to mimic big markets. Small markets simply cannot compete with big markets in terms of what they have available. Small markets need to appeal to the community's desire for having that amenity and communicate to potential shoppers that they need to support the market in order to help it grow.

## Customer Focus Groups

Customer focus groups provided insight into what motivates shoppers to come out to farmers markets and what factors go into their decision about who to shop from. The key themes that emerged were about the healthfulness and quality of the produce as a motivating factor; the social element of the market; and the relationship and sense of trust that shoppers have with vendors and the market as a whole. Major themes are summarized as follows:

### 1. Fresh, tasty, natural, healthy food

---

The most consistent themes by far were the topics of farmers market food being fresher, tasting better, more natural, and overall healthier than options elsewhere. While they are distinct topics, they were often discussed together and in response to multiple questions, including what motivates them to shop at the market, what makes products worth a higher price, and why they prefer the market to the grocery store.

“Pues porque la fruta es mas fresca. Tiene que estar toda la vitamina alli.”  
*(Well because the fruit is fresher. It must have all of the vitamins in it.)*

“The produce is more fresh and healthy. It costs more, but it is worth it.”

“Yo vengo porque es la mas fresca, todos los productos son mas saludable.”  
*(I come because it's the freshest, all of the products are healthier.)*

“Se queda mas fresco, lo orgánico. Hay una diferencia.”  
*(It stays fresher, the organic stuff. There's a difference.)*

### 2. Children.

---

Shoppers are motivated because of their children—both for their health, and for the experience that they can have at the market. Whether or not parents feel comfortable bringing their kids to the market is a huge factor in how motivated they are to come.

“I expect there to be fruits that kids can sample. I think that is one of the drawing facts of a farmers market—that kids get to experience different flavors of fruits and veggies.”

“For me it's the quality and experience. I'm from Mexico and we have it there and I like that my kids are exposed to that. It reminds me of home. And I like that my kids get to know seasonal vegetables.”

“Los niños salen de la escuela y quieren comer y van a la actividad y van a probar fruta y ahi pierdo toda la tarde el viernes.” *(The kids get out of school and they want to eat and they go to the activity and go try fruit and so I spend the whole afternoon there on Fridays.)*

### 3. Social atmosphere.

---

The atmosphere of the market was also a strong theme among participants. The market is much more than a shopping experience, but also a social event that can be relaxing, and an opportunity to connect with neighbors and friends.

“Yo voy porque me gusta. A mi me encanta el farmers market. Voy con mis amigos y me paso allí feliz. Eso me gusta. Me ayuda. Es mi tierra” (*I go because I enjoy it. I love the farmers market. I go with my friends and I’m happy there. I like that. It helps me. It feels like home.*)

“It’s like a miniature festival and you bump shoulders with people. You are forced to talk to other people while you are getting food.”

“Somos un grupo de seis mujeres que nos juntamos allí y compramos las verduras. Y el día que me falta me siento mala. Todos los viernes estamos allí. Empezamos como una comunidad.” (*We have a group of six women who get together there and buy vegetables. And the days that I miss it I feel bad. Every Friday we’re there. We started like a community.*)

### 4. Trust and *confianza*.

---

The idea of trust—in particular *confianza* among Spanish speaking participants—came up a lot, both on the topics of vendor relationships, as well as trust in the quality and safety of products. As discussed in theme 1, products being natural or organic was very important to customers, however, having actual organic certification did not come up as being particularly important. Customers appear to have a lot of trust in their farmers market growers that they are producing their products without chemicals and that products are more “organic” than in the grocery store.

“I’ve seen signs that we don’t use pesticides but we are not certified organic. And I trust their word.”

“Yo pienso que porque es un farmers tiene que tener como algún certificado o algo como chequeando para ver si estan haciendo algo bien para ponerlos ahí.” (*I think that because it’s a farmers market they must have like some kind of certificate or something verified to see if they are doing something good in order to be put here.*)

“Yo tengo la seguridad de que todos los vendedores ahí están vendiendo comida, legumbres, todo, y están bajo un control y yo tengo esa confianza.” (*I feel secure that all the vendors there are selling food, vegetables, everything and they’re under some control and I have that trust.*)

#### 4. Relationship with vendors.

Another strong theme is the relationship with vendors, which came up in response to multiple questions. Customers value the relationship they develop with vendors over time, and the general sense of community that it builds. Particularly among Spanish-speaking participants, the attitude of vendors are very important to their decision of who to shop with, and whether to shop at all. Customers discussed how important it was for a vendor to be “amable” (friendly).

“Para mi es importante porque somos una comunidad, y vamos al farmers market martes a martes y es como, puede ser un customer de esa persona, y . . . me gusta regresar por la actitud que ellos muestran.” (*For me it’s important because we are a community, and we go to the farmers market Tuesday after Tuesday and it’s like, you can be a customer of that person, and I like to return because of the disposition that they show.*)

“Los vendedores son bien amables también ahí y, bueno, varios ahorita me conocen y yo pienso que es, como, mas unido que cuando uno va a la marketa porque uno nada mas agarra las cosas y va al cajero.” (*The vendors are also really friendly there and, well, several know me now and I think that is, like, more communal than when you go to the supermarket because there you just grab your stuff and go to the checkout.*)

“Somos latinos y en nuestros países son los puestos así. Allí no son supermercados. Estamos acostumbrados. No dicen ‘pásele senora.’ Ahí es un contrato directo con el vendedor y el comprador. Y en el supermercado son máquinas.” (*We’re latinos and in our countries places are like this. There they aren’t supermarkets. That’s what we’re used to. They don’t say ‘Next in line, ma’am.’ There it’s a direct relationship between the seller and the buyer. And in the supermarket they are machines.*)

#### *Customer Focus Groups Summary*

Themes from customers provide profound insight into what motivates shoppers to come to farmers markets. Many existing marketing materials emphasize supporting local farms as the main selling points for farmers markets. Eating local did not come up at all among our focus group participants; rather, these shoppers seem to be motivated by their health and the way that the market makes them feel. These insights from shoppers indicate that they are coming to the farmers market not because they are motivated to support the local economy or are gourmet foodies, but because they want to lead healthier lives and be connected to their community. These motivating factors are important for marketing efforts, and indicate that marketing strategies could benefit from emphasizing health and social events.

## Discussion

Grant funding announcements, neighborhood planning projects, and numerous other community development opportunities emphasize the creation of new farmers markets, with the implied assumption that community members will then access this fresh food by default. The results of this research add much needed nuance and complexity to the conventional attitude that the mere existence of farmers markets helps to achieve better food access. Our understanding before beginning this research was that farmers markets in Los Angeles in fact struggle to maintain their operations, and our research provides some insight into both the factors contributing to this struggle and the possible solutions to it. Perhaps more importantly, however, it provides evidence that farmers markets serve a much more complex role in their communities than simply serving as a food access point or alternatives to a grocery store.

Among vendors, the most meaningful insights are the extent to which these small businesses are relying on farmers markets to sustain and grow their business. Whether a farmers market is relatively high-stakes—as with farmers travelling 2 or more hours each way with highly perishable product—or low-stakes—as with hobby artisans who are content to sell a few crafts each day—farmers markets are often the only sales outlets for these businesses. With the fates of markets and their vendors so closely tied together, it would be natural for vendors to be involved in the marketing of individual farmers markets—however, this appears to rarely be the case. This may have to do with the fact that farmers market stall workers are rarely the same people who are doing marketing for the businesses they represent. Likewise, market managers often rely on volunteers to do their social media marketing, which would be the easiest way for vendors to promote the market. Our insights are based on a short questionnaire among a relatively small number of vendors, many of whom were not business owners. A more comprehensive survey among farmers market vendors would greatly benefit the understanding of business practices among this group; however, collecting this data in a consistent manner poses many logistical challenges.

Among the most meaningful insights from market managers is the disconnect between a manager's job description and the actual requirements of running a successful farmers market. A manager's job is officially operational: they are responsible for the set up and take-down of the market, collecting vendor fees, ensuring that local and state regulations are followed, and troubleshooting any issues that arise during the course of the market. By being the point person for the market they are also, however, almost single-handedly responsible for the success or failure of the farmers market, which is an enormous burden to carry. Farmers markets are outlets for small businesses and small farms to do direct sales; however, they also function as small businesses in their own right, needing to sustain themselves and grow based on the fees they charge to vendors. Market managers are effectively actually running small businesses, but receiving little to no training, mentoring, or larger investment to do so. It is no wonder, then, that so many farmers markets struggle to reach economic sustainability, given that managers do not have the tools they need to both operate and promote their business. While

the perspectives discussed here represent only a small number of market managers, the experiences were extremely consistent among this small group.

A larger survey of market managers from urban areas across the state or nation would provide meaningful insight into how markets are managed and what changes in investment and attitude would benefit them.

Among customers, the most meaningful insights are the importance of health and social connection. Based on the way farmers markets are talked about in the media and by farmers market operators themselves, one would expect shoppers to be motivated by a desire to support local farmers, buy organic, or simply eat the highest-quality produce. While focus group participants did talk about organic and higher quality food, they did so while simultaneously and interchangeably talking about food being healthier, better for you, and more nutritious. Among these shoppers, the concepts of fresh, natural, organic, nutritious, and healthy appear to basically be synonymous. While this doesn't represent an accurate understanding of these concepts, it shows that for these shoppers, the farmers market provides a package deal of healthful, feel-good food that the alternative—a grocery store—does not, and that healthy, feel-good feeling is a huge motivator. While our focus groups were in no way representative of farmers market shoppers as a whole, the views represented in our research were very consistent across the different focus groups and lead us to believe that these views are likely held among at least a subset of farmers market shoppers.

The issue of social connection at the farmers market is also noteworthy. The importance of social connection is demonstrated in customers' expression of the importance of the market as a family activity, an opportunity for friends to get together, and to have an experience of buying food that feels personal and friendly. Social connection is also reinforced by managers' comments about how markets make places "come alive" and serve as "hubs" in the community, and customers come not only for the food, but also to see their friends and neighbors, and develop a relationship with vendors. Social connection is reinforced even among vendors who appreciate the "vibe" of a market and want to stay at markets they enjoy being at. Celebrations, performances, and other intentionally social activities are often organized as promotional events to get new customers to the market; however, these results indicate that the social element of the market is actually part of the fundamental structure and purpose of the market, and should be built into its day to day operations.

The results of this research generally support our hypothesis that neighborhood-based marketing strategies can provide solutions for struggling farmers markets, with strong caveats. There are structural barriers to marketing success—namely the lack of capacity among market managers, and lack of involvement in marketing from vendors. However, the powerful meaning that farmers markets have for some customers, as well as the importance of relationship building within market operations, all point towards community-building as a key element of farmers market success. Our pilot marketing strategies will explore this potential and aim to provide further insight into the role farmers markets play in the communities that they serve. The following *Market Together Principals* were developed as a result of this research and will be used in developing the pilot.

# Market Together Principles

Building on the insights from this research, UEPI has developed *Market Together Principals* to guide farmers market marketing and promotion strategies. Moving forward with the design and pilot-testing of neighborhood-based marketing strategies, we plan to incorporate the following four principals into print, social media, and atmospheric promotional strategies: 1. social connection, 2. health & lifestyle, 3. accessibility, and 4. ownership of the market.

## *Social Connection*

Insights from managers, customers, and vendors alike make it clear that the social element of a farmers market cannot be ignored or discounted. Markets should put significant effort into building up the social aspect of the market, including creating welcoming spaces for customers to sit and eat, spaces that are well-lit in winter and shady in summer, including music and other entertainment, and kids space. Markets should also emphasize social events in their marketing, and utilize social media to connect with both customers and vendors.

## *Health and Lifestyle*

“Fresh, healthy, and high quality” seem to be the overarching theme for what attracts customers to the products at farmers markets. From the comments made by customers, it is clear that farmers market produce not only tastes better and is of clearly higher quality, but there is something about farmers market produce that makes people feel healthier, and like a healthier lifestyle is more within reach for them. Marketing materials should emphasize and convey the “healthy” quality of farmers markets.

## *Accessibility*

While not often talked about extensively in our interviews and focus groups, price is the elephant in the room for farmers markets. Manager interviews point to the importance of food assistance acceptance and incentive programs at markets, and these programs should be broadly communicated and promoted to the public.

## *Ownership*

Market managers expressed what a difference it made when communities felt a sense of investment and obligation to the market, and understood their role in determining if a market would succeed or fail. Markets cannot function as independent business that appear once a week—but as integral parts of the neighborhood landscape. Markets should seek to engage directly with customers, partner with community institutions, and support other community businesses and events.