

Managing the Farmers Market:

Lessons from People's Food Co-op

BY CHRIS MOORE

As People's Food Co-op of Kalamazoo's first three-year contract to manage our city's century-old Kalamazoo Farmers Market comes to a close and winter settles in, we find ourselves reflecting on what we've learned. In a few short years, our market has grown from 70 vendors to a seasonal peak of 180, making it Michigan's second-largest farmers market. We've added three staff positions, and we've started brand new market ventures in our Washington Square Market and quarterly Night Markets.

Our vision for the co-op's role at Kalamazoo Farmers Market (KFM) has also changed—instead of building capacity among market vendors to eventually assume independent management, we heard that they would prefer People's to continue managing the market. We head into 2016 with a strong vision and three years of valuable lessons learned.

Building local relationships

People's Food Co-op (PFC) operates a single-retail food co-op that grew to \$3.3 million in sales during 2015. We expanded in 2011, building our current store, and have been experiencing huge sales growth in recent years. Taking on management of KFM has created both major challenges and significant gains for our co-op.

With KFM nearly doubling its vendor participation, we felt the sting of lost sales in our grocery store during the summer months, as we had anticipated. In return, it's now easier for food producers in the market to build and maintain relationships with our grocery store, which helps increase the availability of local products in the store. The co-op added 20 new local vendors in 2014 alone. Similarly, our relationships with local farmers through our retail store encouraged those producers to consider selling at the market, closing the loop between retail and market sales for many small food businesses.

One of our most pressing concerns at the beginning of our tenure as market managers was the desire that market vendors and the public view PFC as trustworthy. We responded by pulling our retail's Farmers Market booth from the market and by maintaining a strong separation between the market and our retail store in our branding and promotion efforts. While we did update the KFM logo and branding, we chose to evolve the brand it had when we took over rather than change it to fit our store's look.

We also heard that market vendors feared that the co-op would impose the strict product standards we maintain at our retail location at the Farmers Market as well. Of course, it was never our intention to radically change an already successful market.

Our co-op's Ends call us to create access to healthy food, so we worked hard to encourage transparency and to facilitate relationships among



Photo by People's Food Co-op

vendors, shoppers, and the co-op. To this end, we implemented a new signage program in which market businesses self-selected as a Grower, Retailer, Producer, or Artisan. We now conduct farm visits, with a goal of visiting all of our nearly 180 market vendors. Following those visits, our market team writes blog posts and posts them to our market website, driving engagement between shoppers and producers.

We've also created a searchable database of market vendors and their products for shoppers to browse online—something we believe is the next step in national farmers market development. Perhaps one of the largest contributions to food access that we've implemented has been bringing food assistance currencies into the market space. SNAP benefits, Double Up Food Bucks, WIC Project Fresh, and Market FRESH currencies allow those receiving food assistance to purchase fresh, healthy, and local foods to the tune of over \$90,000 annually, with most of those dollars supporting local food producers.

Rebranding in 2016

In hindsight, it's likely that we inaccurately estimated the risk of lost trust and probably erred on the side of caution, especially when it came to maintaining such a separation between the brand identities of our market and retail store. Happily, our trust-building efforts were largely successful, and in 2015 we realized that if we are to keep the farmers market as a program of People's Food Co-op, we must begin to bring those separate brands much closer together. We are planning a rebranding campaign in 2016 that will unify those identities.

In addition to losing sales at our store because of the market, 2015 brought the arrival of two national chain competitors to Kalamazoo and the subsequent expansion of an existing natural foods store. Establishing ▶