



Davis Farmer's Market Case Study

Connecting Farms and Community

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Introduction

The Davis Farmers' Market is one of the most well-known and successful farmers markets in the state of California. The involvement of numerous community organizations, businesses, and individuals has established the Davis Farmers' Market (DFM) as a center of local community life and culture. The ambiance of this market attracts large numbers of local families and students, as well as visitors from all around California, the U.S., and abroad. The market serves as a community gathering place, tourist destination, and source for a wide range of direct-marketed fresh vegetables, fruits, flowers, prepared foods and crafts. As such, the DFM provides a unique forum that has fostered the development of many small businesses and has played an important role in the larger business community of Davis.

The city of Davis is a university community known for its strong commitment to progressive and innovative ideas, as well as a dynamic, involved citizenship. Davis has a highly educated population—over 60 percent of adults hold college degrees. The University of California at Davis (UCD), with more than 25,000 students, plays a prominent role in this city of 56,000 people. In addition to contributing a diverse population of students, faculty and staff from around the world, UCD also hosts a wide range of educational and research programs, university organizations, and outreach programs. The wealth of resources within the city of Davis and the university community have been important in the development of the Davis Farmers' Market.

History of the Market

The Davis Farmers' Market was started in 1975 by a small group of local organic farmers and community members. During its first year of operation, the market hosted about ten local growers. The DFM was created with the objective to support local farmers while providing consumers with fresh, locally grown produce. By facilitating direct sales from grower to consumer, DFM founders saw an opportunity to support small and beginning growers, who were often unable to compete in conventional marketing arenas. The fee scale for DFM vendors is a percentage of gross sales, reflecting the original intention that small growers would not be prohibited from participating in the market.

The creation of the DFM was closely connected with the establishment of the Davis Food Co-Op, an early alliance that provided stability to the new market. For about six months after the farmers' market first opened, DFM organizers, who were also operating the Davis Food Co-Op,

offered to buy all remaining produce from farmers' market vendors after the market closed. Ann Evans, one of the DFM founders who later served as mayor of Davis, explains that through this "insurance program," market organizers "were able to entice farmers to come to the market while the clientele was building." This was important for helping to create a consistent market for vendors and customers during the critical time when community awareness of the market was first developing.

In 1976, the City of Davis passed an ordinance to create an official framework for the DFM to operate within the city. After the California Department of Food and Agriculture established statewide regulations for direct marketing and certification of farmers' markets in 1977, the DFM became one of the first four certified farmers' markets in the state.

Jeff and Annie Main are two of the original market founders who still sell at the DFM today. When they started their organic farming business on three-quarters of an acre in 1975, they quickly found that wholesale markets were virtually inaccessible to small farmers like themselves. However, the Davis Farmers' Market offered them a consistent marketplace where they could sell their produce at retail prices. In the beginning, they often had to deal with low volumes and variable product availability—typical challenges for small, beginning farmers. Unlike other marketing outlets, the DFM could easily tolerate fluctuations in quantity and variety as Jeff and Annie "grew their business" from the bottom up, and learned the skills they needed along the way. Being part of the DFM also helped them to develop the network of support they needed to survive in a young industry (organic farming) with little agricultural experience. Jeff and Annie's original vision of connecting local agriculture with local consumers still guides their farming goals and strategies. Today, their farming business, Good Humus Produce, remains one of the mainstays of the DFM. Jeff and Annie now raise vegetables, flowers and fruit trees on their 20-acre organic farm in the Capay Valley, about 45 miles northeast of Davis. In addition to fresh produce and flowers, they sell a variety of jams, jellies, dried fruits and vegetables, herbs, dried flower arrangements and wreaths at the market. Good Humus Produce also supplies several wholesalers with fruit and vegetables, and they have a 100-member community supported agriculture project (CSA or subscription farm).

The Market Today

A young farmer starting out would find a very different setting at the DFM today than the market's environment of 25 years ago. The DFM is now among the largest farmers' markets in California, with an average of 85 vendors every Saturday. Over the course of the year, 180

different vendors attend the market. While many of the vendors are still local, others come from all across Northern California, and even as far away as Oxnard and Santa Maria in Southern California. Operating year around, the Saturday market attracts 5,000 to 7,000 people each week, and up to 10,000 during special events. Annual gross sales exceed \$1.5 million. The market is governed by the Davis Farmers' Market Association, a non-profit organization, through an 11 member Board of Directors consisting of eight farmer-vendors, one non-agricultural vendor, and two community representatives.

The DFM still operates in its original Central Park location, but many improvements have been made to the park, enhancing the environment of the market. In 1984, a covered structure was built by the city of Davis, which now houses a large portion of the market's vendors, and makes year around operation more viable. The city's master plan for the park guided the construction of a large deck adjacent to the structure, which was funded by the Davis Farmers' Market Association.

Becoming a Cornerstone of the Community

Randii MacNear, manager of the Davis Farmers' Market, was hired in 1978. Over the years, her role as manager has been shaped by the market's Board of Directors to facilitate a central objective of the DFM: Creating a network of community support and participation in the farmers' market. In the beginning, Randii saw that the DFM was perceived by the local business community as a vehicle to primarily benefit farmers living outside the city, without providing direct benefits to the city itself. To overcome this perception and to cultivate a broad level of local support for the market, she and the market's board set out to develop relationships that would establish the market as a vital part of the community. This has been the central theme around which the DFM has developed. In fact, the DFM has become such an important part of the Davis community that today it is difficult for many people to imagine the community without the market. Randii explains, "Early on, I got involved with promoting the community through the farmers' market. Now, the farmers' market has really become a showcase of the community—the shining star of Davis; it exemplifies what the community really is."

Randii's dedicated effort to connect the DFM to community activities and organizations in every possible capacity has involved participation in numerous civic and educational organizations. Randii has served as president of the Davis Chamber of Commerce, and she has been deeply involved with the Downtown Davis Business Association, various UCD activities, the community's International House, the Davis Joint Unified School District, the California

Department of Health Services, the Children's Fruit and Vegetable Five-a-Day Campaign, and many others. She has also played a leadership role in the statewide California Federation of Certified Farmers' Markets, and she regularly gives presentations at conferences and meetings throughout the state. In all of these activities, Randii has established relationships between a wide range of organizations and the DFM, gathering ideas and opportunities for promoting the DFM locally, regionally, and statewide.

Building a sense of local community ownership of the DFM has also been an important goal. An area of the market open to community groups and political organizations and candidates has given a strong voice to local politics and community issues. Over 500 non-profit organizations do outreach at the market each year, helping to raise an estimated \$1 million that goes back into the community. School and community group performances are often the entertainment at the market during special events. Monthly market events, typically co-hosted with community and business organizations, the city of Davis and groups from UCD, bring together local non-profits, county-wide agricultural groups, local schools, farmers and citizens. Randii explains that the 1999 Fall Festival, one of the market's largest events, involved participation by at least 25 different community groups. Activities included the Soroptimists running a pumpkin patch for children, 4-H groups showing their animals, the Davis High School Key Club selling pies, the UCD Chemistry Club giving demonstrations, the UCD Raptor Center displaying owls, the Davis Science Center presenting hands-on exhibits, and many more. Through these events, the market serves as a showcase where community organizations can promote themselves, conduct fundraising, and connect with the larger community.

Weekly events at the market, such as cooking demonstrations with food tasting and free recipes, provide education for the community about nutrition, diet, health and agriculture. Institutions in the area related to these issues are brought together to promote these events. Randii also promotes the DFM through local schools by conducting workshops on nutrition and agriculture in high school home economics classes and elementary science classes. Student interns from the California State University, Sacramento Nutrition Program help with demonstrations at the market and at nutrition programs in schools.

Another way the market gives back to the community directly is through donations of food by the farmers to emergency assistance programs. Randii estimates that 95 percent of the fresh fruits and vegetables served at community meals and sent to the Yolo County Short Term Emergency Aid Closet come from DFM farmers.

The development of partnerships with so many community organizations has involved a long process of becoming integrated with the community and demonstrating the many ways that the DFM contributes to the area. The Davis Farmers' Market Association has worked hard to demonstrate that its members are giving back to the city in exchange for the support and use of facilities they are allowed. Although the market association does not pay rent for the use of the Central Park space, it contributes to the park in a number of ways. In addition to paying an annual fee of \$1,000 for electricity and park use, the association spends \$10,000 each year for cleaning and maintenance of the park structure. It has contributed \$30,000 to park renovations, including the construction of the large deck and performance area adjacent to the structure. The association also makes ongoing contributions to other park improvements.

Tourism and Impacts on the Davis Business Community

In addition to serving local residents, the Davis Farmers' Market is an important tourist attraction, bringing visitors into Davis from other parts of the state and beyond. The DFM has worked hard to establish itself as the biggest "event" in Davis, a defining institution of the community which is recognized throughout the region. With this distinction, the DFM promotes itself as a destination for the many visitors who come to Davis, particularly those connected to the university. Through conferences, symposia, and other events on campus, UCD plays a particularly important role in drawing out-of-state and international visitors to the city. These visitors represent an important market that the market association targets through relationships with various UCD programs and planning committees. The attraction of the DFM helps to provide a "bridge" for these visitors into downtown Davis.

Promoting the DFM as a tourist destination has become a priority of the market association, and has begun to play a role in shaping the marketing goals and strategies of some market vendors. Through her work with the Davis Chamber of Commerce, the Downtown Davis Business Association, and UCD, Randii is involved with several committees that aim to promote tourism and attract visitors to Davis. She works with these organizations to host events and prepare marketing and tourism brochures that promote the DFM, among other aspects of the Davis business community.

Other Davis businesses reap the benefits of increased visitor traffic through the city, as well as the positive image the DFM reflects on all of Davis. DFM has tried to be very sensitive to the

needs and concerns of the downtown businesses. As an active member of the Downtown Davis Business Association, the DFM promotes downtown businesses throughout the year and especially at certain market events. For example, one market day in June is dedicated to "Chamber Day," in which the Davis Chamber of Commerce sets up a large business fair in Central Park with over 100 displays by local businesses and chamber organizations.

Dean Labadie is the 1998-1999 president of both the Downtown Davis Business Association and the Davis Farmers' Market Association Board. He explains that the downtown businesses, for the most part, have come to recognize the benefits that the DFM provides in attracting people to the downtown area. Despite some conflicts between the two organizations in the past, he says "[there is] a good marriage now between the farmers' market and the downtown businesses." The fact that one person is serving as president of both these organizations reflects the degree to which they have come to share common interests and a positive, cooperative relationship.

Contribution of the DFM to Growth of Vendors' Businesses

Aside from the contributions that are made to community development, attracting a large number of people each week to the farmers' market has a fundamentally pragmatic purpose: providing a customer base for market vendors. Certainly, one of the most important functions of the Davis Farmers' Market is to support the success and development of the agricultural, craft and food businesses that sell at the market. The DFM fosters the development and expansion of vendors' businesses in a number of ways.

Beyond the level of individual sales to tourists and community members, Randii tries to help agricultural vendors make connections with local restaurants and grocery stores which are interested in buying fruits and vegetables directly from farmers. She frequently invites chefs from local restaurants to participate in cooking demonstrations at the market, giving them an opportunity to test produce from the market in their recipes while promoting their restaurants to the market customers.

Even within the market, business relationships are formed between vendors. For instance, some of the restaurants and prepared food businesses that sell at the market purchase ingredients from other market vendors.

Panna Putnam often buys vegetables and herbs from farmers at the market to use in the samosas and other Indian food that she sells. Panna started her business, Samosas to Go, at the DFM six years ago. Inspired by the idea of marketing Indian food to American tastes, she felt the Davis Farmers' Market would be the perfect setting for her new business. Building on the infrastructure already in place at the farmers' market, she was able to start out with a relatively small investment in a food cart and equipment. Her business has grown as she has built up a steady clientele. Contacts made through the DFM often lead to catering jobs for parties and festivals. Panna has developed several products from her experience selling at the market that she now sells wholesale to grocery stores. While she expects that the future expansion of her business will primarily come through more wholesale sales, Panna explains that the DFM will always be important for her business as a low-overhead storefront and an incubator for developing new products. "We will only introduce a product at the wholesale level when it has been tested through the farmers' market. Then we can approach stores, knowing that it is a good product and it will sell." In this way, she does not have to invest in costly labels, packaging and nutritional analyses before she is sure that a new product will be successful.

Many other DFM vendors have commented on the importance of the market as a testing ground for product development and pricing research. Colleen Osland started her candlemaking business four years ago when she brought 50 handmade candles to the Chico Farmers' Market and sold them all. Soon after, she started coming to the Davis Farmers' Market and began building a business out of a beekeeping hobby. Feedback from customers helped her develop several products that have become very successful sellers. Now Colleen and her husband Mark sell candles through farmers' markets, craft shows, wholesale and internet direct sales. They have recently opened a storefront at their production facility in Paradise, California. Their business, Goldenspirits Candleworks, now employs eight people through the Work Training Center in Chico, which provides training and employment for people with disabilities.

As these examples show, vendors at the DFM have frequently used their experience at the farmers' market to help them enter other marketing channels. Farmers' market vendors have often expanded into wholesale markets and other direct marketing channels through contacts established at the farmers' market. Specifically, the increased number of tourists at the DFM has influenced the marketing strategies and goals of several of the vendors. Geri Bogdanich sells fresh apricots and a variety of dried fruits and nuts from her family's farms near Lodi. Many of her products are very well suited to gift packaging, which she has emphasized in recent years. Geri is interested in expanding into more mail order business, which she sees as an

attractive market for her dried fruit gift packages. The large number of tourists at the DFM makes it a good place to begin developing a mail order business.

Les Portello sells almonds at the DFM in various forms—plain, salted, flavored, and made into almond butter. He is also a senior agricultural economist at the California Department of Food and Agriculture. Les sees farmers' markets as a very important way to tap into the tourist market and promote "California grown" products. He has mail order customers from outside of the local area, and even out-of-state, who have bought his products while visiting a farmers' market. Les is interested in developing a statewide effort to promote farmers' markets to tourists. He explains that the unique atmosphere of farmers' markets offers a marketable experience for tourists. "This is the reason people go to wineries [to buy wine]; they are looking for a good experience." In the same way that the wine industry and certain agricultural areas in California like Apple Hill have built a strong tourism industry, he feels that farmers' markets have the potential to generate significant growth for agricultural businesses through tourism. Speaking about almond growers, he says, "the visitor component...is our future, in terms of moving our industry forward."

Even as vendors businesses expand into new markets, the farmers' market usually remains an important component of the overall marketing strategy, and can complement other marketing outlets. Paul Abramovitz of Affi's Marin Gourmet has been selling vegetable spreads and fruit dipping sauces at the DFM for six years. Their products are now sold in several grocery stores in Davis. Paul says that the farmers' market is a great place to promote his products, even if customers end up buying them in the stores. He offers generous samples of his spreads on crackers to everyone who passes by his stall. He explains that farmers' markets provide instant retail cash, while his wholesale accounts with stores have delayed payments. Because of this, farmers' markets play an important role in maintaining the necessary cash flow for the business.

Annie and Jeff Main have directed an increasing amount of their sales into their CSA over the past several years. The CSA offers certain advantages, such as being able to pick exactly the amount of produce they know they will need, and providing money up front from subscribers to pay for farming expenses. However, the Mains feel that maintaining a strong presence at the farmers' market is important for ensuring the stability of their farming business. Because the CSA requires a quarterly payment in advance by the subscribers, sales through this channel may be more likely to decline in times of economic hardship. They explain that being part of the farmers' market is likely to provide more stability in their marketing opportunities over the long term. Annie also notes that the relationships they have established with customers through the

farmers' market have given them a longstanding presence and base of support in the community. The degree of dedication that many customers have developed for Good Humus, and the level of support that the Main family has personally received through these relationships has been an important factor in the evolution of their business and their lives.

Another benefit that the DFM offers to its vendors is assistance in developing better marketing and presentation skills. In the many years that Randii has been managing the DFM, she has watched many vendor businesses develop, expand and struggle. She tracks weekly sales of all the vendors, and tries to work with vendors to improve their marketing approach when she sees sales slipping. DFM newsletters for the vendors also offer marketing ideas. In addition, the market association hires consultants for workshops at their annual meetings to analyze stall displays and provide suggestions for better design. In order to reach out to the large number of vendors who don't attend the annual meeting, and those who are reluctant to have their display critiqued in front of a group, the market Board has arranged to offer individual consulting sessions to all the market vendors during the coming year. Randii explains that while relatively few of the vendors have taken advantage of these opportunities, those that do have benefited.

Geri Bogdanich has incorporated many ideas from workshops at the DFM annual meetings into her display at the market. Suggestions about product presentation, stall design and signage have helped her to create a layout that establishes a more distinct presence in the market and is more effective at drawing customers into her stall. In addition to the Davis market, Geri attends or sends her products to eight other farmers' markets throughout the year. The ideas she has gleaned from the DFM benefit her presentation at other markets as well.

Challenges and Opportunities

As one of the more established markets in California, the DFM exemplifies many trends in the growth and development of large farmers' markets. Some of the challenges faced by the DFM are very typical of farmers' markets across the state, while others may signal challenges that younger markets will have to contend with in the future.

Although the DFM was founded with the intent of fostering the survival of small and beginning farmers, the market today is full, thus preventing most new farmers and start-up businesses from participating. In fact, there has been a waiting list for the Saturday market for the last 15 years. Randii says that currently the only new vendors she will admit to the Saturday market are those who offer a product that she doesn't already have represented at a certain time of year, or

an organic product that is not offered by the other vendors. Dean Labadie has suggested that the DFM create a designated section of the market for "start-up businesses," but difficult issues with seniority have raised objections for such a plan. Some of the vendors feel that there are already too many vendors at the market, causing sales to be spread thin among those offering the same products. Providing opportunities for new businesses without sacrificing the success of current vendors can be a difficult balance to achieve.

Competition has become an increasingly important factor for farmers' market vendors in recent years, as vendors at the DFM are quick to point out. Owing to the growth and success of farmers' markets, grocery stores have improved their produce selections and displays, often trying to mimic the look of a farmers' market display. Grocery stores throughout California have also begun carrying more organic and locally grown produce. Although grocery stores will never be able to provide all of the services of a farmers' market, such as same-day freshness and direct sales from the grower, they have taken significant strides into areas once considered the domain of farmers' markets. In this larger climate of supermarket trends, it is important for farmers' markets to promote the unique services and experience they can provide.

Competition among vendors at the markets has grown significantly in the past ten years. The increasingly competitive environment has changed the outlook and goals of some vendors who have historically sold at farmers' markets. Dave Phillips is a fifth generation farmer whose family sells fruits and vegetables at the DFM grown on 150 acres near Lodi. They also grow wine grapes on 350 acres. Dave's parents began selling produce directly to customers from a roadside stand at their farm in the 1950s, and Phillips Farms has been selling at farmers' markets in Northern California since 1979. Dave explains that increased competition has had important impacts on his family's business. Regarding farmers' market sales, he remarks, "over the last five years, the growth in it for us has stopped. I think the market is more or less saturated now." As a result of decreasing profit margins from farmers' market sales, they have decided to cut back on their product line for farmers' markets and expand more into wine grape production, where profit margins are much higher.

Many vendors have responded to growing competition by diversifying the products they offer, and expanding into more value-added items. Geri Bogdanich has seen her family's farm become much more diversified as they have sought new products to offer at the farmers markets. Her father started selling fresh and dried apricots at farmers' markets more than 20 years ago. Over the years, as more people selling the same products have entered the markets, Bogdanich Farms compensated by planting nectarines, apples, figs, walnuts and tomatoes.

They have also expanded their apricot orchards to include several different varieties, thereby extending their season of fresh fruit sales. Geri tries to create new products and packages each year to maintain customer interest. In recent years, she has added jams, jellies and fruit rolls to the products she sells. In addition, she offers cooking tips, recipes and nutritional information about all of her products.

Annie Main expanded her offering of jams, jellies and dried vegetables at their market stand after watching how people at the market spend much more money on value-added items than on fresh produce. Finding a certified kitchen where she could make her jams initially posed a challenge for Annie. She has used the kitchens in several local restaurants, but the hours when the kitchens are available have not always been convenient. Annie would like to do more with value-added products from her farm, but she is limited by restrictions on the types of products an agricultural vendor is allowed to sell. For example, she would not be able to sell zucchini bread made with the zucchinis from their farm because that would be considered a baked good, which can only be sold in the "auxiliary area" adjacent to the certified farmers' market.

Randii points out that as more and more vendors diversify the products they are selling, this continues to fuel the competitive environment in the market. She cautions that vendors need to consider carefully the impact that diversification will have on their business as a whole. She has seen instances where the pressure to become diversified has caused a vendor to take on more than they could handle, resulting in a lower quality product. Randii explains that as a manager, she is constantly trying to help her vendors examine themselves critically, in terms of their display, quality and abundance of products. She feels it is important that vendors are able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their business, especially if they are attempting to make significant changes in their business or marketing strategy.

Like most farmers markets, the DFM struggles with the issue of parking. The market association has tried shuttles to the market from various points in town and at the UCD campus without great success. Dean Labadie remains hopeful that providing shuttles can help to strengthen the link between downtown businesses, the DFM, and the university. He also suggests that shuttles may be particularly important for connecting specific groups with the market and downtown, for example by providing shuttle service from the senior citizens center.

The development of a large, successful market like the DFM can have trade-offs in a loss of the intimacy that a smaller market offers. Close relationships between growers and consumers, and among the market vendors, are not as easily formed amid large crowds and the busy pace of a

bustling market. As vendors expand their businesses to attend several farmers' markets each week, they often turn their stalls over to employees who interact with customers directly.

Some vendors have suggested that promoting more networking among vendors would be beneficial for strengthening relationships within the market. Panna Putnam suggested profiling a different vendor in each DFM newsletter, including a photo. By helping vendors learn about each other, this could encourage more collaboration on marketing strategies, in addition to strengthening the sense of community in such a large market. For example, Les Portello has thought about trying to coordinate with a hot food vendor who would be interested in serving roasted almonds from his stand as a condiment. Cross-promotional activities like this could benefit several vendors while introducing consumers to new ways of using their farmers' market purchases.

For some vendors, the expansion of the DFM and the growing competition from grocery stores has prompted them to put more attention on education for their customers. A few vendors provide recipes and nutritional information about their own products, while making an effort to talk with customers about the unique benefits that a farmers' market offers. Several vendors at the DFM mentioned that there is already a high level of awareness among many customers at the DFM about the opportunities a farmers' market provides for supporting smaller and local growers, building a sense of community through food and agriculture, as well as having a selection of high quality produce, including organic food products. This awareness among the Davis community is noted as a particular strength of the Davis Farmers' Market. Efforts to increase the awareness of farmers' markets unique benefits among the general public, through education by vendors and farmers' market associations, is likely to be very important for maintaining the strength and growth of farmers' markets throughout California in coming years.

Conclusions

In its 25 year history, the Davis Farmers' market has become a successful institution at the heart of community life in Davis, and a well-known attraction for visitors and tourists. The DFM has provided an entry point for many new businesses, a testing ground for new products, and a place where business and marketing skills are developed. Through a wide base of community involvement and support, the DFM has become a place where local citizens, organizations, area businesses and farmers form relationships, creating new business opportunities and strengthening the bonds of community. Building and maintaining these relationships through the farmers' market is an ongoing process. The DFM manager Randii MacNear cites this as the

primary objective of her job, and the key to the success of the DFM.

Although the DFM has undergone extensive changes over the years, it continues to serve the original objective of creating an alternative marketing channel that supports smaller, diversified farms and provides fresh, local produce to consumers. However, expansion of the DFM and changes in the larger climate of supermarkets have also brought new challenges. Increased competition and fewer opportunities for new businesses to enter the market pose challenges that affect the role of the farmers' market and the business strategies of vendors. It is more important than ever that consumers understand the unique benefits and services that a farmers' market provides. The strong community involvement and outreach at the DFM has been critical to raising the level of awareness among local consumers and building relationships that serve to support, promote and sustain the market locally and statewide.

For more information

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The California Federation of Certified Farmers' Markets

<http://farmersmarket.ucdavis.edu>

The Davis Farmers' Market is located in Central Park, 4th and C Sts.

Saturday market hours: 8 a.m.- Noon, year around

Wednesday market hours: April-September 4:30-8:30 p.m.; Oct-March 10 a.m. - 2 p.m. (Oct-March Wednesday market may change to 2-6 p.m.)