

Survey Determines Consumer Demand for a Local Farmers Market

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Summary

Regional and local farmer's markets have sprung up across the Commonwealth of Virginia. To the dismay of many, farmer's markets fail to remain open for much longer than one season. Several reasons can contribute to this including inadequate demand, too few vendors, and poor product selection; just to name a few. A survey was conducted for the town of Wytheville residents to determine their preferences and objectives for their local farmer's market. In 2009, a 20 question survey was developed and mailed to 1,017 town residents to gather information about the existing farmer's market and to guide future direction for the development of a more permanent farmer's market. Two hundred and eighty-three surveys were returned, all containing usable data. Respondents indicated a strong desire to have a local farmer's market and felt that local residents benefitted from having one conveniently located within or near to the town of Wytheville. Products they desired were identified and demographic data were collected. Preferences for operational days and hours were clearly evident as well as general location recommendations. The Farmer's Market Focus Group, the local Chamber of Commerce, and local extension service personnel can use the information from the survey to locate and facilitate a local farmer's market that will be more likely to be successful and sustainable.

Introduction

Farmer's markets have gained popularity across the entire nation within the last decade. The number of farmer's markets has increased nationwide since 2000 by 84% (USDA, 2009). Virginia is no different with local farmers markets developing or growing in nearly every small town. According to the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services "Virginia Grown" Website, eleven farmer's markets are within sixty miles of the Town of Wytheville. These include Abingdon, Blacksburg, Bluefield, Galax, Glade Spring, Independence, Marion, Pulaski, Radford, Hillsville, and Tazewell. The problem with many farmer's markets is that not all remain in operation much past a year. In fact a seven-year study in Oregon reported that of 62 markets that opened, 32 markets closed for various reasons (Brown, 2007). The Wytheville Farmer's Market, located in a small town in Southwest Virginia, has been in existence in some form or fashion for several years now, but has lacked direction and consistency. The market has changed locations, facilities, and operational hours multiple times during its years in operation. These factors never truly meshed consumer needs with vendor capabilities. The objective of this study was to give the farmer's market focus group solid guidance to make the market successful in the short term and ensure longtime consistent growth and survival.

Materials and Methods

Working with the local Chamber of Commerce's Farmer's Market Focus Group, a survey instrument was developed. The questions were designed to gather information from potential farmer's market customers in and around the town of Wytheville. The survey began with a short narrative of the scope and purpose of the survey and contained 20 total questions. The survey length was kept at a minimum and a drawing for a monetary gift certificate was provided to encourage response. Eighteen of the questions were close-ended and six of those questions were formatted into a Likert-type scale (Likert, 1932). Two questions were open-ended.

The survey was reviewed by multiple sources prior to release. The Farmer's Market Focus Group was given an opportunity to critique the survey and make changes they desired. Survey professionals from Virginia Tech and the Wytheville-Wythe Bland Chamber of Commerce then further reviewed and made comment to finalize the survey before mailing. The survey was not pre-tested. The Chamber of Commerce provided the source for procuring a mailing list, which was generated from the Public Information Office for the Town of Wytheville. The mailing list was scrubbed to remove redundancies and mailing address errors. The original list consisted of over 4,068 residents of whom 25% were randomly selected. A total of 1017 residents were mailed the survey on 4 May 2009 with a requested response deadline of 22 May 2009. The response rate was over 20% within the first two weeks, that a survey reminder was not sent. Upon receipt, the surveys were consecutively numbered in order to remove any identifying personal information. The data was entered into Virginia Tech's on-line survey software to facilitate analysis of the data.

Demographics. Of all respondents 57% were females and 40% were males. The age breakdown was 47% over the age of 65; 28% aged 56-65; 12% aged 46-55; 10% aged 36-45, and 1% aged 26-35 (Fig. 1). Compared to the 2008 Census estimate, Wythe County was comprised of 51.9% female and 17.7% of the population is over 65 years of age. The college education level of respondents was above the 2000 Census average for Wythe

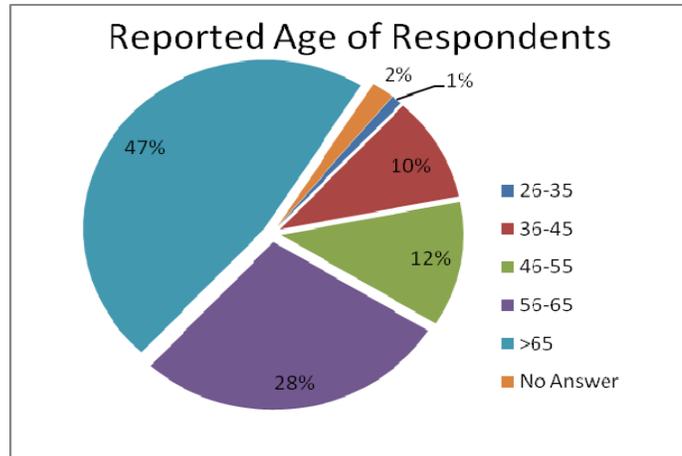


Figure 1: Reported age of respondents

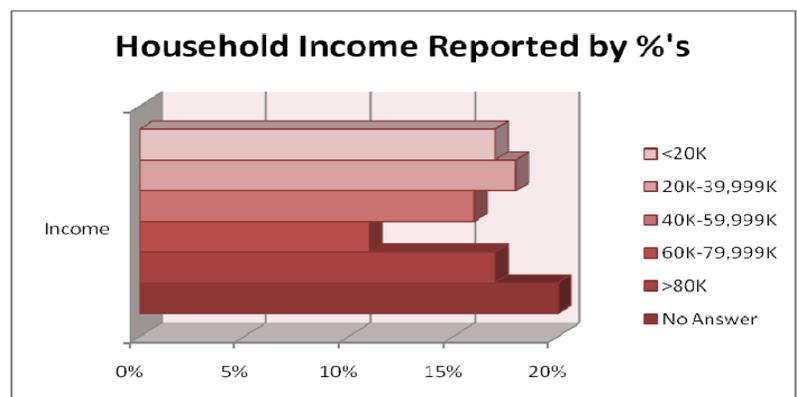


Figure 2: Household income of respondents

County. Forty percent have a high school degree or equivalent. Twenty-six percent have a B.S. degree and 23% have a M.S. degree or higher.

Household income levels were fairly consistent across the board (Fig. 2). Levels and percentages recorded were less than \$20,000 (17%), 20-\$39,999 (18%), 40-\$59,999 (16%), 60-79,999 (11%), greater than \$80,000 (17%). Twenty percent of respondents did not indicate their household income level. To aid the farmer’s market committee with determining the number of dependents living with farmers market customers, a question asked how many children under the age of 18 were living with them. Eighty-four percent indicated none, 6% indicated 1, 4% indicated 2, and 2% indicated 3.

Results and Discussion

General farmers market questions. A total of 283 surveys with a response rate of 27.8% were returned with all surveys containing usable data. Over two thirds of respondents (68%) had previously visited the farmer’s market in Wytheville. Of the 283 survey responses, 96% felt Wythe County would benefit from having a local farmer’s market and 90% indicated they would be interested in participating as a consumer. Twenty-four respondents or 8% indicated they would be interested in becoming a vendor as well.

Of the 68% or 193 who had previously visited the farmers market, 61% want products that are locally grown, 56% desire high product quality, and 49% enjoyed the convenience of the local farmer’s market (Fig.3). Other farmer’s market qualities identified by respondents were price of products (40%), accessibility (36%), product selection (31%), vendors (16%), and other activities at the farmers market (4%). When asked what days were most convenient for the farmers market, 83% indicated Saturday, 62% Friday, 32% Thursday, 31% Wednesday, 29% Monday, 27% Thursday, and 24% Sunday.

Respondents indicated a preference for operational times during the weekend morning (57%) and 45% for weekday mornings. Weekend afternoon (33%) and weekday evening (31%) were the next favored times. The least favored times of operation were weekday afternoon (28%) and weekend evening (22%).

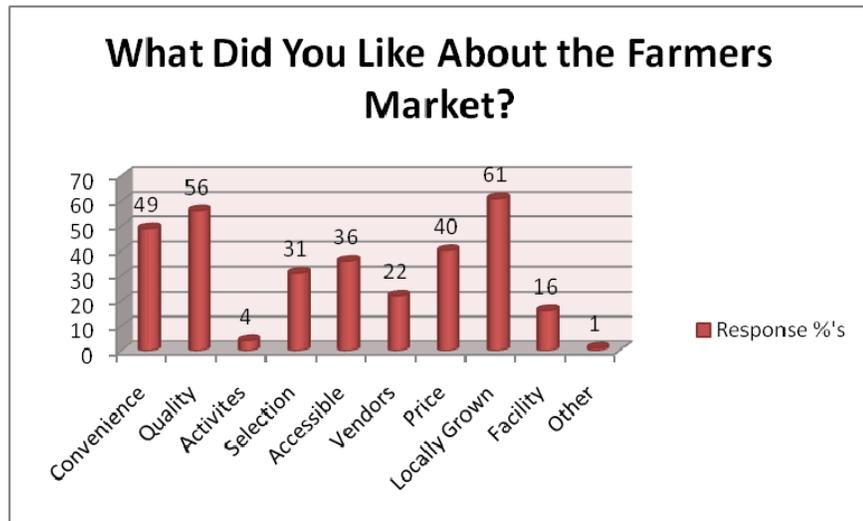


Figure 3: Chosen attributes about the Farmers Market

When asked what products they would like to see at the farmers market, vegetables (96%), fruits (94%), plants (61%), baked goods (46%), and dairy products (44%) were the top five (Fig. 4). Other responses were cut flowers (25%),

crafts (23%), meats (19%), and trees (11%).

Respondents could check all categories that apply. **Subjective questions.** Only 15% of respondents strongly felt that the products should come solely within Wythe County, whereas 30% strongly felt they should come from within Wythe and surrounding counties (Fig.5). Additionally, 36% agreed that the products should come within Wythe

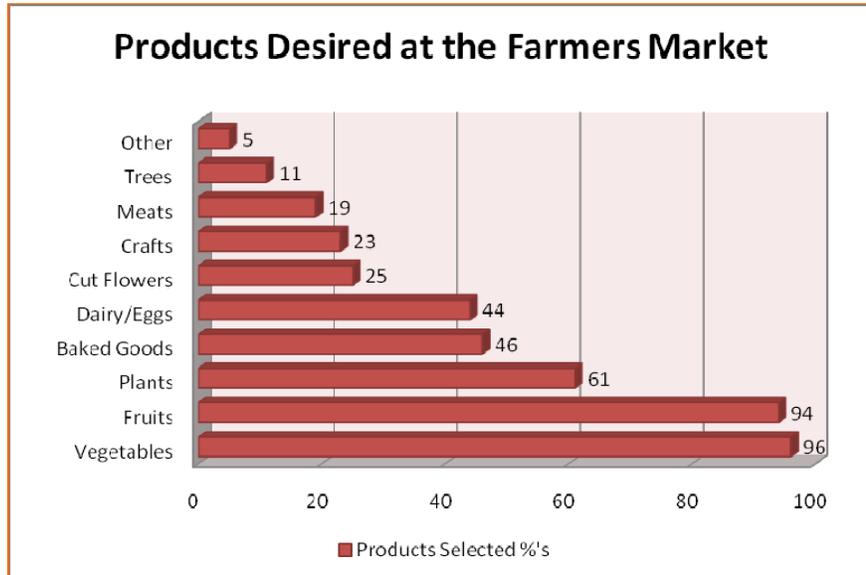


Figure 4: Products desired at the Farmers market

County compared to 46% agreed that products should come from Wythe or surrounding counties. Consumers were not that concerned whether they personally knew the grower. Forty-two percent had no opinion on this issue and 20% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with having to personally know the grower. When asked about product pricing, 77% felt that prices should be comparable to local supermarkets compared to 16% who felt that prices did not need to be comparable.

Natural and organic products have gained popularity among consumers. In fact, double-digit consumer growth for organically produced goods has occurred for over a decade (USDA, 2009). In many localities, consumers seek these products. The results showed many Wytheville residents desire these products with 40% either strongly agreeing or agreeing for the offering of these types of products (Table 1). However, 34% of respondents had no opinion on the offering of natural or organic products and 16% disagreed that these types of products had to be offered. When

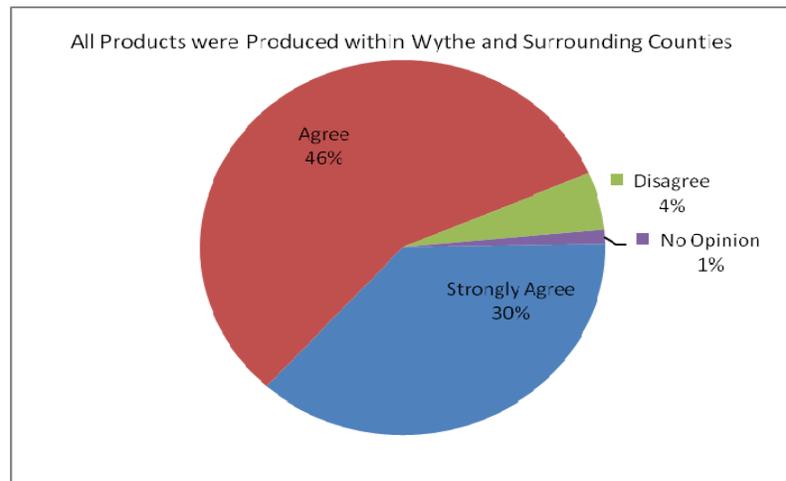


Figure 5: Respondents preference regarding whether products were produced locally

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asked if they thought products offered should be unique and fresher than supermarkets, the majority or 80% either agreed or strongly agreed. To determine under what circumstances farmer’s market customers would visit the market; a question was asked if they were most likely to visit the market as part of a regular food shopping activity or in a destination in itself. Sixty-four percent indicated that they would visit the market as a regular food shopping activity and 42% would make the farmers market a separate destination. Only 13% indicated they would not visit as a regular food shopping activity and 5% said they would not make the farmers market a destination.

Table 1. Response percentages to subjective questions of what consumers feel are important to them in a local farmer’s market.

| Subjective Opinion Questions | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | No Opinion |
|---|-----------------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| All products come from within Wythe County | 15 | 36 | 15 | 2 | 21 |
| All products are produced within Wythe and surrounding counties | 30 | 46 | 4 | 1 | 13 |
| I expect prices at the Farmer’s Market to be comparable to local supermarket prices. | 17 | 60 | 15 | 1 | 4 |
| I know the producer who grew the product. | 3 | 27 | 18 | 2 | 42 |
| The Farmer’s Market offers certified all natural or organic products | 7 | 33 | 15 | 1 | 34 |
| Products are unique and fresher than from the supermarket | 28 | 52 | 3 | 0 | 10 |

Conclusions

Creating and maintaining a successful farmer’s market cannot rely on the old adage of “build it and they will come” attitude. In fact according to a seven year study from the University of Oregon, for every 2 markets that opened, 1 closed (Brown, 2007). To be successful, farmer’s markets must be accessible and have convenient operating hours. The survey identified potential consumers and past customers

and queried their wants and needs with a local farmer's market. Obviously, this was a hot button topic with a response rate of almost 28% after a one-time mailing. It came as no surprise to see that Wytheville town residents want a local farmer's market, with 96% indicating a local farmer's market would benefit the residents there. Almost as many residents, 90%, said they would participate as a consumer if the market was available. Following trends across the nation, the preferred time of operation is during the weekend mornings. Products desired were similar for Wytheville residents as to other markets across the United States. Respondents indicated they like the fact that products are local; specifically, from Wythe and surrounding counties. Fruits and vegetables were the most desired products by far, followed by plants, dairy products, and eggs. . They also responded that they did not have to personally know the grower. Natural and organic products are popular today, 50% responded they would like to see these products offered. Fifty-seven percent of respondents were female with 75% being 56 years of age or older. While these percentages do not exactly correlate with the Census data, I think they accurately portray who visits the Wytheville Farmer's Market. Many would think that working mothers would be some of the biggest customers at local farmer's market, but 84% reported that no children lived in their home. Respondents were educated, with 49% having completed a B.S. degree or higher, and household income was reported at >\$40,000 or higher for 44% of the respondents. Responses gleaned from the survey were very indicative of consumer preferences and objectives. The results from this survey will allow the Farmer's Market Focus Group, the local Chamber of Commerce, and local extension service personnel to develop and plan a future farmer's market that will have a much greater chance of success and survival.

Contributions

This survey could be replicated in other localities. The largest investment was time preparing the survey and manually entering the data into a data analysis model. Together, along with other details this comprised around 40-50 man hours. The survey could be printed, folded and bulk mailed for around \$.20 per copy. For a mailing of 2-3,000, this represents a cost of \$400-\$600. Surveys completed have to be mailed back and this expenditure depends on the number of respondents. Postage for this would be the normal first class rate at that time, which was \$.445 for this survey. Some type of enticement is nice to aid in encouraging survey completion and return. For this survey, a \$25 Chamber Gift Certificate was given away to one randomly selected respondent.

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Wythe County QuickFacts from the U.S. Census Bureau.

<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/51/51197.html>