Horticultural Crop Sales and Participation in Rural Farmed Markets

D.T. Lindgren

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Summary. Thirteen farmers' markets have been established in west-central Nebraska with varying degrees of success. Sales and seller participation in the active markets have varied from year to year. Farmers' markets in small communities, as well as in larger metropolitan areas, can be successful.

University of Nebraska West Central Research and Extension Center/Horticulture, Route 4, Box 46A, North Platte, NE 69101.

There has been a renewed interest in the past 10 to 15 years in using farmers' markets for direct-marketing of agricultural products. It is a marketing method that is appealing to many growers as well as many consumers. Much of the information available about farmers' markets comes from markets located in relatively highly populated areas, from surveys conducted for only 1 year, or from surveys of buyers at farmers' markets (Capstick, 1982; Courter et al., 1980; Steinberg, 1986). Information on sales and seller participation at smaller farmers' markets over several years would be useful for determining the potential economic value and feasibility of establishing markets in communities with lower populations.

Thirteen farmers' markets have been started in rural communities in central Nebraska since 1977. Sales information was collected annually from these markets. This information included the number of market days, number of sellers, and reported sales (when available) for each year, of operation from 1977 through 1989 (Table 1). Six of the 13 markets are still active. The seven markets that are no longer active existed for an average of 1.7 years, and averaged 10.4 market days per season, 4.1 sellers per day, and 10 different sellers per season. The markets still active through 1989 operated for an average of 11 years, and averaged 11.8 market days per season, 8.1 sellers per day, and 23.1 different

sellers per season. Sales data, which were not available for all markets, can be expressed as total sales or can be averaged on a per-seller/season or per-seller/day basis.

The North Platte farmers' market has been the most active of all these markets (Tables 2 and 3) and may help to explain the relationship between participation and sales. There was a general increase in total sales and average sales per seller per day at the North Platte market from 1977 to 1987, and a decrease in 1988 and 1989 (Table 2). The largest total reported seasonal sales for an individual seller at the market varied from a low of \$590 in 1977 to a high of \$4700 in 1986 and 1987. The highest 1-day sales by a single seller was \$517 in 1986. Seller participation varied from year to year (Table 3).

The success of small farmers' markets varied from community to community in west-central Nebraska. It is difficult to draw conclusions as to why some markets went out of operation based on a comparison of data collected from the active and nonactive markets. However, the active markets averaged about twice as many sellers per day and twice the number of different sellers per season as the nonactive markets.

From discussions with county cooperative extension personnel in the communities involved in these markets, it was observed that markets that draw growers from greater distances

and more counties, such as the North Platte market (Table 3), have a more uniform supply of produce, leading to a more stable, balanced, and active market. Farmers' markets that did not remain active generally 1) lacked a uniform and adequate supply of produce, 2) lacked good leadership to promote and operate the market, and 3) lacked cooperation among growers in organizing their marketing activities.

The successful markets promoted themselves through advertising and good public relations and made changes in market operations as needed. These changes include what is allowed to be sold, the time and day of market operation(s), and the fees charged to sellers.

Year-to-year fluctuations in sales are influenced greatly by seller participation and growing conditions. There was a yearly increase in total sales at the North Platte farmers' market from 1977 to 1987, except for 1980 and 1983. There was a decrease in total sales from 1987 to 1989. This coincides with the variation in stalls per season and number of different sellers per season, going up in most years and down in 1980, 1983, 1988, and 1989. The decrease in the number of sellers in 1988 and 1989 could be attributed partially to hail and other adverse weather conditions that reduced yields, shortened the growing season, lowered the quality of produce, and caused sweet corn to mature over a relatively

Table 1. General summary of farmers' market activities for individual communities, 1977-89.

Community	Population	Date of operation	No. years	Avg market days/season	Avg no. sellers/day	Avg different sellers/season	Total reported sales for best year (\$)
Nonactive markets							
Ainsworth	2,256	1982-83	2	16.0	5.0	18.0	2,500
Bassett	1,009	1982	1	16.0	2.0	2.0	NA
Cozad	4,453	1982-83	2	12.5	3.3	4.5	NA
Grant	1,270	1979	1	1.0	7.0	7.0	NA
Imperial	1,941	1982-83	2	8.0	3.5	13.5	650
McCook	8,404	1980	1	12.0	3.0	10.0	NA
Ogallala	5,638	1979-81	3	7.3	5.0	14.7	NA
<i>Average</i>			1.7	10.4	4.1	10.0	
Active markets							
Benkelman	1,235	1979-89	11	10.9	5.2	16.3	3,700
Broken Bow	3,979	1979-89	11	11.6	3.5	8.0	NA
Curtis	1,014	1979-89	11	7.9	4.0	13.2	1,550
Gothenburg	3,479	1980-89	10	9.0	9.2	18.2	3,250
Lexington	7,040	1980-89	10	11.5	10.9	21.1	6,600
North Platte	22,000	1977-89	13	19.8	15.9	62.0	38,024
<i>Average</i>			11.0	11.8	8.1	23.1	

Table 2. *Reported sales for the North Platte farmers' market from 1977 to 1989.*

Year	Highest sales/season per individual seller (\$)	Highest sales/one seller for one day (\$)	Total yearly sales (\$)	Avg sales/seller per stall per day (\$)*	Avg sales/seller per season (\$)
1977	590	170	5,500	34.59	96.49
1978	1244	325	9,960	57.24	262.10
1979	1210	300	13,050	55.77	197.72
1980	1795	475	12,300	55.91	256.25
1981	1760	308	15,240	56.03	311.02
1982	2185	250	21,160	58.29	306.67
1983	NA	NA	17,839	61.73	349.78
1984	2700	160	23,061	75.86	480.44
1985	4500	400	32,109	79.09	465.34
1986	4700	517	35,294	80.03	425.23
1987	4700	410	38,024	77.44	400.25
1988	3363	410	29,128	71.22	383.26
1989	3620	300	20,838	62.95	365.58

*One seller per day equivalent to one stall per day.

Table 3. *Seller participation in the North Platte farmers' market from 1977 to 1989.*

Year	No. market days	Avg no. sellers/day*	Total stalls/season	Different sellers/season	Sellers returned from previous year (%)	No. localities represented [†]
1977	11	14.5	159	57	---	10
1978	12	14.5	174	38	9.0	10
1979	13	18.0	234	66	45.9	11
1980	12	18.0	220	48	34.3	9
1981	17	16.0	272	49	40.4	8
1982	21	17.3	363	69	35.3	18
1983	22	13.0	289	51	34.3	7
1984	24	12.6	304	48	37.0	16
1985	24	16.9	406	69	60.4	17
1986	23	19.2	441	83	61.9	17
1987	27	18.2	491	95	52.8	21
1988	26	15.7	409	76	34.7	19
1989	25	13.2	331	57	54.4	15

*One seller rents one stall per day.

[†]Based on home address as listed by each seller.

short marketing period. Returning sellers from previous years add stability to market sales, but certainly cannot account for all the variation in year-to-year sales (Table 3). The increase in sales, beginning in 1981, was partly due to extra market days, resulting in more stalls being rented per season (Table 3).

The numbers of sellers per market day, stalls per season, and different sellers per year vary from season to season and affect the total sales at a farmers' market. Total sales are closely related to the number of stalls rented

per season, which, in turn, is related to seasonal growing conditions and number of market days.

The information collected in this 13-year study indicates that farmers' markets can be successful in rural communities. However, the success of the markets will vary from community to community and sales within markets will vary from year to year and from seller to seller. Farmers' markets should be considered for use as a marketing method for horticultural crops in smaller communities.

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