



NATIONAL RECREATION  
AND PARK ASSOCIATION



A Farmers Market Resource  
**VENDOR ENGAGEMENT GUIDE**





The Overland Park Farmers Market offers a wide variety of fresh produce. Photo courtesy of City of Overland Park (Kansas).

## **Farmers Market Vendor Engagement Plan**

Vendor recruitment and retention are recurring challenges faced by farmers markets throughout the country. To respect the variety of market communities, their vendors and their conditions, there is not a one-size-fits-all model to farmers market vendor engagement in parks and recreation. Instead, we encourage park and recreation professionals who support farmers markets to use this guide of considerations, best practices and market examples to develop a market plan for vendor engagement that is centered in equity and cultural responsiveness and reflective of your community.

To build successful and equitable vendor engagement strategies at your farmers market, ask the following questions:

### **? Has your market reviewed and acknowledged the history of agriculture in your region?**

Agriculture can have a complicated and traumatic history for people with current or ancestral connections to the agricultural food system. Research the history of agriculture in your region. Who was allowed access to farmland ownership and who was removed or excluded from owning farmland? Has agriculture in your region exploited the labor of communities of color through slavery, unsafe working conditions, low wages or dishonest work opportunities for migrant laborers? Understanding the history of food production in your community is essential to supporting your current farmers market and its role in your food system. With that knowledge, you can then acknowledge the agricultural history in your community and make informed decisions about how your farmers market can contribute to a more equitable food system. When a farmers market can communicate its role in systems change in the larger food and civic systems, it can more easily integrate market vendors and stakeholders into its mission of prioritizing diversity, equity and inclusion within the farmers market. Visit [Soul Fire Farm's Resources Page](#) for a [timeline](#) of U.S. food sovereignty movement.



The Overland Park Farmers Market offers a wide variety of fresh produce. Photo courtesy of City of Overland Park (Kansas).

**? Who are your current vendors?**

Review your current list of vendors and compare their demographics with those of your municipality. Are your vendors reflective of your community? If there is an underrepresented demographic of market shoppers, is that demographic also underrepresented in your vendors? Vendor diversity supports a diversity of market products and a diversity of people in the market to which shoppers can relate and feel connected.

**? What role do vendors play in the design and management of the market?**

Do vendors serve on your board? Do you have a vendor advisory council? If not, how do vendors advise farmers-market operations? As key contributors to and beneficiaries of your farmers market, their voices are essential for guiding farmers market policies, programs and practices.

**? How does the market engage vendors to grow the market?**

Successful farmers markets engage vendors as product developers for growing their farmers markets. You can partner with your county cooperative extension agents and other agricultural professionals to engage new farmers and connect vendors with farmer resources. Conduct outreach with small business cooperatives and networks on their ability to vend at your market and grow their business. Engage vendors in tasting panels, cooking demonstrations and focus groups on new products to bring to the farmers market. Collaborating with vendors on product promotion at the farmers market benefits increased customer experience through product sampling and supports increased sales for vendors.



## ✓ Market Example: Vivian Farmers Market (Louisiana)

In the summer of 2021, Vivian, Louisiana, began a farmers market with one produce vendor to address significant rates of food insecurity within the rural town. Based on community needs assessment data, the town addressed the need to increase access to healthy foods by expanding farmers market programming. Surveyed participants indicated that their only source for fresh produce is one local grocery store, which can mean that produce access is limited and, at times, the market stock is unavailable due to supply issues. The community needs assessment also revealed days, times and locations that the farmers market would be most accessible to consumers. The original plan to offer the weekly farmers market on a park-site location was modified to hold the market in the town square downtown location, which was more easily accessible to community members with transportation limitations.

During the first season, the town marketed the program through social media, distribution of flyers within the community and local media outlet announcements. Fresh produce was purchased by more than 500 consumers during the summer season, with retail sales for vendors exceeding \$5,000.

In three market seasons, the town of Vivian grew from one to 35 vendors, with 54 percent of its vendors and community partners identifying as Black-, Hispanic- or people-of-color-led businesses/organizations. A key component of its market growth was engaging Vivian's market vendors as promoters and recruiters of additional vendors and customers. Market vendors were engaged as partners in the development and growth of the Vivian Farmers Market and increased market reach through promotion of market dates and events in their networks. Vendors were appreciated as leaders; one vendor was hired as an associate market manager and subsequently engaged other vendors into market leadership roles. The success of Vivian Farmers Market demonstrates that when vendors are supported by the market, vendors will invest in supporting market growth.

### ? How does the market engage vendors in decision making?

Are vendors surveyed or engaged in how they would like to see the market grow and improve? Do you ask vendors for input on measures of success? Are results from vendor surveys shared with vendors and implemented into vendor-informed policies and practices? Consider involving vendor goals in grants and sharing lessons learned from data collection and pilot programs with them. Creating a trusted, frequent feedback loop with vendors creates continuous opportunities for vendors to inform farmers market programs and feel aligned with the market's mission and goals.

### ? How does the market engage vendors to grow the diversity of the market?

Examine who is and is not represented at the farmers market and how engaging a diversity of vendors can increase market representation to create a more inclusive environment for underrepresented market customers. In short, are your vendors representative of the community you serve? Identify outcomes that benefit vendors and the farmers market by increasing vendor diversity. A diversity of vendors attracts a diversity of customers, contributing to increased market attendance, increased market sales, and increased sales for underrepresented vendors. Vendor diversity also creates opportunities for programs that support the cultural well-being of your community. Collect data on the impact that markets have on vendors and use these outcome goals to guide vendor engagement and demonstrate the importance of vendor diversity for market success.



## ✓ **Market Example: Bloomington Community Farmers Market (Indiana)**

To contribute to the City of Bloomington (Indiana) Parks and Recreation’s efforts to increase diversity and inclusion, the Bloomington Community Farmers Market created an annual farmers market event, called Harvest for the World. Harvest for the World is an experience of sight, sound and taste; it features cross-cultural fashions, dance and exotic sounds from Bloomington’s international communities. While this initiative does not replace intentional recruitment of diverse vendors, it does strive to create bridges and broaden understandings within the Bloomington community, while promoting inclusion of various cultural elements at the Bloomington Community Farmers Market.

The Bloomington Community Farmers Market believes that creating meaningful experiences requires enlisting participants (e.g., farm vendors, food and beverage artisans, and entertainers) who reflect the underrepresented communities of Bloomington. This impactful experience is not solely for fellow vendors and artisans, but it also is for the various culturally diverse communities that attend through intentional outreach or to support their friends and acquaintances who participate. Harvest for the World, thereby, serves as a gateway for community members to experience the market as an inviting, engaging and safe place for them to return to.

Additionally, the Bloomington Community Farmers Market has intentionally recruited diverse participants to its 11-member Farmers Market Advisory Council. The council comprises vendors and customers and has increased its diversity by successfully onboarding vendors and customers of diverse nationalities. Diverse vendor engagement in the Farmers Market Advisory Council and Harvest for the World has been critical to the success of reaching underrepresented communities and supporting a community of cultural belonging at the Bloomington Community Farmers Market.

### ❓ **What message does your market’s application process send?**

Who is featured in pictures from the market? How clear is the vendor interest form? Often, the process for becoming a vendor is not clear and may have barriers, such as insider language, unclear or unfair fees, or an application process and timeline that are less than transparent. Engaging the market community, including current vendors, shoppers and other partners in the process of reviewing and updating vendor applications, will offer valuable peer and expert information to the decision-makers. Recuse any vendors who might have a conflict with a new vendor application — due to product similarity or other reasons — and ask each person to be transparent about potential conflict of interests.

Make a process for reviewing and returning to vendor applications not accepted into the market. Consider working with a partner or extension agency to survey declined applicants annually and examine if the process is accessible and clear. Review market language to ensure it informs current and prospective vendors on how to offer new products at the market.

### ❓ **How do you appreciate and celebrate your vendors?**

Do you recognize vendors in market newsletters, social media promotion and other mediums of marketing and outreach? Do you offer recurring opportunities for vendors to enjoy a meal or refreshments together and exchange best business practices with one another? Identify regular opportunities for vendor recognition or celebration that vendors can look forward to and strengthen their connection to your farmers market.





## ✓ Market Example: Overland Park Farmers Market (Kansas)

To continually grow and improve its farmers market, Overland Park, Kansas, initiates an annual evaluation of its farmers market through an extensive survey of market shoppers and vendors. All data is compiled into an annual report that is made available to the public and shared with all vendors. Each year, vendors are highlighted and recognized for different values, benefits and attributes. Some categories are even voted on by the vendors themselves. The Overland Park Farmers Market also has a Years of Service recognition program. On certain milestone years, vendors receive a gift to show appreciation for their dedication to service.

On an annual basis, the Overland Park Farmers Market hosts a year-end banquet to celebrate the successes of the year. It's the market management's way to say thank you to both the vendors and staff. Celebrating vendors' personal and professional successes and distributing awards and special recognition on social media, in weekly emails and at the market is a large component to building comradery. Additionally, market management regularly offers smaller gestures of appreciation through acts, such as sending sympathy, get well, congratulation and holiday cards. Appreciation and celebration of vendors start and end with relationship building and recognizing that people come first; building and maintaining relationships are essential to individual team and overall market success and well-being.

## ■ Vendor Engagement Best Practices

Now that you've critically reviewed how your market engages vendors and considered opportunities for improving your vendor engagement, below are some best practices to follow for strong and equitable vendor engagement. As you update and improve your vendor engagement practices, identify ways to strengthen them as policies in a market engagement plan that can continually be reviewed and updated to center diversity, equity and inclusion within your farmers market. For additional guidance on engaging market stakeholders and developing a market engagement plan, visit the [Anti-Racist Farmers Market Toolkit](#).

- Continually review your process for engaging current vendors in the vendor application, vendor leadership and vendor search processes.
- Engage your board and market advisory councils to ask what your process is for reviewing the possibility of past harm done to prospective vendors in the application, leadership and recruitment processes.
  - Investigate how to share these processes with the market community, and always question how you can refine these processes to be anti-racist.
- Get to know your vendors. Talk to them during market days and visit their farms if invited.
- Cultivate new vendor leaders while honoring vendors with seniority at the market.
- Share farmers market analysis and plans with vendors.
- Ask vendors what resources or services would benefit their business and connect them to business development partners, farmer resources, food safety workshops or any services to support their needs.
- Avoid favoring certain vendors and always ask vendors for their input and guidance on farmers market policies, practices and programs.



## ✓ Market Example: Whitesburg Farmers Market (Kentucky)

When severe flooding devastated Eastern Kentucky farmland, the Whitesburg Farmers Market supported farmers with resources, financial services and free soil testing to support them with flood recovery.



The Overland Park Farmers Market serves as a vibrant hub for the community. Photo courtesy of City of Overland Park (Kansas).

Do you manage farmers markets in parks and recreation and have additional considerations to add to this guide? Contact [health@nrpa.org](mailto:health@nrpa.org) to share recommendations and/or get engaged in the development of NRPA's farmers market resources and offerings.

For additional farmers market resources, guides and tools, visit [nrpa.org/farmersmarkets](http://nrpa.org/farmersmarkets).

