



Case Studies for Farmers' Market Conflict Resolution in Maine and Vermont



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1. Addressing Long-Standing Rule Violations to Restore Market Integrity

SUMMARY

A farmers' market applied conflict resolution and governance training from the project to address a decades-long rule violation by a founding vendor who sold products they did not produce. With support from the training, the organizer became more involved in market leadership, engaged outside mediation, and relied on clarified bylaws and committee roles to enforce market rules consistently. Although the process was difficult, the vendor was ultimately removed for noncompliance, resulting in improved market morale, renewed participation in market governance, and rewritten bylaws that now prevent similar conflicts and support fair competition for all producers.

1. Overview of the Conflict

a. Who was involved

The conflict involved a long-standing vendor, other farmer-vendors, market organizers, and customers.

b. What was the conflict

A founding vendor was selling certain products that they did not produce and could not verify the source of. This practice violated both market rules and state regulations. Despite the clear violation, enforcement was avoided for many years due to the vendor's long tenure at the market and the perception that addressing the issue would be difficult.



The situation was compounded by inappropriate and confrontational interactions between the vendor and customers who asked about product origins. These exchanges created confusion and discomfort and undermined trust in the market.

c. Impact on the market

The ongoing rule violations distorted competition, making it difficult for producers to compete with lower-priced, bought-in products; some producers stopped participating or chose not to apply to the market at all. Vendor morale declined as inconsistent rule enforcement became a recurring source of tension, and conflicts around fairness and accountability frequently dominated annual meetings, preventing productive discussion and discouraging participation in market leadership.

2. How the Conflict Arose

Although the market had bylaws stating that products must be producer-grown and locally sourced, there was no clearly defined process for addressing violations or for allowing exceptions. Because the vendor had been selling bought-in products for decades, a precedent for non-enforcement was established.

At the governance level, leadership roles and committee structures were weak. Responsibility for enforcing rules rested with a membership committee that was understaffed and largely inactive for an extended period. Market leadership avoided addressing the issue directly, which further eroded trust and disengaged vendors from participating in governance.

3. Steps Taken to Address the Conflict

After two market leaders participated in conflict resolution training, one became more involved in market governance and joined the membership committee to help address long-standing issues. The committee agreed that the rule violations needed to be addressed and sought outside support from an agricultural mediation program to facilitate a structured conversation with the vendor.



Market leaders relied on existing bylaws to communicate clear expectations: the vendor could continue participating only if they complied fully with producer-only rules. When the vendor responded with threatening communications and public harassment of market leaders following the mediated discussion, the market took formal action to revoke membership based on unacceptable conduct.

The process was challenging and emotionally taxing, particularly given the vendor's long history at the market and personal relationships involved. However, market leadership acted collectively and documented decisions carefully to ensure accountability and fairness.

4. Current Status and Outcomes

The conflict has since been resolved. The vendor is no longer part of the market, and the market environment has improved significantly. Vendor morale has increased, participation in leadership and committees has grown, and there have been no comparable rule violations since. Market leaders consider the process difficult but necessary, noting that failure to address the issue would have continued to undermine trust, fairness, and market viability.

The business associated with the former vendor has since transitioned to a new owner who has expressed interest in applying to the market under clearly defined conditions, including strict adherence to market rules and no involvement by the individual previously removed.

5. New Processes and Preventive Measures

Following the conflict, the market undertook a comprehensive rewrite of its bylaws and market rules, which were formally approved by the membership. The revised documents clearly define product eligibility, enforcement authority, and acceptable conduct.

Committees now actively use the bylaws to guide decision-making, and the membership committee screens vendor applications in advance of annual meetings to ensure compliance before applicants present to the full membership. Bylaws are reviewed regularly to ensure they remain relevant and effective, helping prevent similar conflicts and supporting a more transparent, equitable market culture.



2. Case Study: Vendor Conduct Conflict

SUMMARY

Restoring a Safe and Welcoming Market Environment

A farmers' market management team applied conflict management principles and governance tools to address repeated incidents of verbal aggression by a long-time vendor toward customers, vendors, and market staff. After months of disruption that caused vendors to avoid one another, customers to stop attending, and market managers to consider resigning, the market relied on its code of conduct and bylaws—reinforced with guidance from service providers—to remove the vendor from the market. Following this action, the market adopted clearer bylaw language prohibiting hostile behavior by vendors and committed to annual review of conduct policies, resulting in restored customer attendance, increased vendor participation, and a return to a positive and safe market environment.

Overview of the Conflict

The conflict involved multiple stakeholders, including a long-standing vendor, customers, other vendors, and market management. Over the course of several months, a vendor repeatedly engaged in verbally aggressive behavior toward customers, fellow vendors, and market staff. These incidents constituted clear violations of the market's code of conduct and expectations for respectful behavior.



Impact on the Market

The ongoing nature of the conflict significantly disrupted the market's operations and atmosphere. Vendors became reluctant to interact with one another out of concern for triggering further incidents, and some vendors felt unsafe or uncomfortable attending the market. Customer attendance declined, including families with children who no longer felt comfortable in the market environment. The stress and emotional toll on market management was severe, leading at least one manager to consider resignation. Overall, the conflict undermined the market's sense of community, safety, and positive engagement.

How the Conflict Arose

This situation arose directly from the actions of a single vendor whose behavior changed unexpectedly after many years of participation without prior incident. Because the market had not previously encountered a conflict of this nature, management initially hoped the behavior was isolated and temporary. Market leadership met multiple times to discuss the situation and possible responses. Despite these efforts, the vendor's aggressive behavior continued and escalated, revealing the need for more decisive action.

Steps Taken to Address the Conflict

Market management sought guidance from community resources to determine appropriate next steps. Following this guidance and additional documented incidents, management made the decision to remove the vendor from the market. The decision was formally communicated through both email and a mailed letter, which documented specific incidents and cited violations of the market's by-laws requiring respectful conduct toward customers, vendors, and staff.



While the process was necessary, it was emotionally and operationally challenging. Management struggled with the length of time the conflict persisted, the visible impact on customers and vendors, and the difficulty of ending a relationship with a vendor who was well known and personally valued by many in the community.

Resolution and Outcomes

The conflict was fully resolved. The vendor involved is no longer part of the market, and one market manager ultimately left their role on good terms. Following resolution, customers returned, vendor participation increased, and the market regained its positive, welcoming atmosphere. From the perspective of market leadership, addressing the conflict was essential; without intervention, the market itself was at risk of collapsing due to organizer burnout and safety concerns.

Lessons Learned and Preventive Measures

As a result of this experience, the market revised its by-laws to explicitly state that hostile or aggressive behavior by vendors would not be tolerated. These by-laws were integrated into regular market governance practices and were reviewed annually with market organizers. These changes strengthened the market's ability to respond proactively to future conflicts and reinforced shared expectations for respectful conduct.



3. Case Study - Vendor Competition Gets Tense

Addressing Vendor Competition and Market Placement Disputes

SUMMARY

A farmers' market experienced a public confrontation between two coffee vendors during market hours when one vendor objected to competition and premium placement of the other vendor. The conflict created visible tension among customers and vendors, despite the market having no restriction on multiple vendors selling similar products. The market manager intervened immediately, explaining that each vendor offers unique products and has their own customer base, and clarified the rationale for vendor placement. The conflict was resolved within the first hour of market operations as sales demonstrated both vendors could succeed. The steering committee affirmed that competition benefits the market, and the manager now offers advance scheduling information to vendors seeking exclusive selling days.

1. Overview of the Conflict

a. Who was involved

The conflict involved two coffee vendors (Vendor A and Vendor B), the market manager, other market vendors, and customers.

b. What was the conflict

Vendor B, who had only attended the market twice during the season, was upset about being placed opposite Vendor A, a regular vendor in their usual premium location. Vendor B openly confronted Vendor A during market hours while customers were present, carrying his sign across the market and complaining that Vendor A's prime location would hurt his sales. The confrontation was rude and created visible tension and discomfort throughout the market. Multiple customers and vendors approached the market manager to complain about having two coffee vendors present.

c. Impact on the market



The public confrontation created an uncomfortable atmosphere for customers and vendors during market hours. The tension was palpable, disrupting normal market operations and affecting the overall shopping environment. Customers and vendors felt compelled to voice concerns about the competition between similar vendors, despite the market regularly hosting multiple vendors with overlapping products without issue.

2. How the Conflict Arose

The market had no rule limiting the number of coffee vendors and regularly accommodated multiple vendors selling similar items without problems. The market's standard practice was to space similar vendors apart to avoid direct adjacency, but both locations were appropriate given operational needs.

The conflict arose primarily from emotional reactions rather than actual policy violations. Vendor B, attending only his second market of the season, reacted negatively to seeing Vendor A established in a prime location. Rather than approaching the market manager privately, Vendor B confronted Vendor A publicly during market hours, escalating tensions unnecessarily. The placement decision was based on practical considerations: Vendor A was a regular attendee and required generator access that necessitated their specific location without disrupting market flow.

3. Steps Taken to Address the Conflict

a. Who was involved? Did outside players step in to assist?

The market manager handled the conflict directly without outside assistance, engaging with both vendors and responding to concerns from customers and other vendors.

b. What by-law, rule, process, or role was relied upon in order to support this process?

The market manager relied on standard vendor management practices and communication. She explained to all concerned parties that each vendor offers unique taste profiles and has their own customer base, expressing confidence that both would have successful sales days. She clarified to Vendor B that Vendor A had attended most of the season and their placement made operational sense given their generator needs and the impact on market flow.

The manager also listened to customer complaints, allowing concerned parties to voice their feelings about the situation.



c. What challenges were encountered while making these steps?

The primary challenge was managing emotions during the conflict. Vendor B's negative and rude behavior was driven by emotion rather than calm communication. Rather than privately expressing concerns to the market manager, Vendor B created a public scene that disrupted normal market operations and called out Vendor A, who was simply working as usual. The atmosphere at the market remained tense until Vendor B achieved enough sales to be reassured that competition would not negatively impact his business.

4. Current Status and Outcomes

a. How did it end for each party? Where are they now?

Both vendors had decent sales days. The conflict was diffused within the first hour of the market being open as Vendor B's sales reassured him that he could succeed despite competition.

b. Is the market better off? Or, is it worse off? Or neutral?

The market outcome was neutral. Normal operations resumed once tensions dissipated.

c. Was it worthwhile to engage in addressing the conflict, from your perspective?

Yes. The market manager's intervention helped all concerned parties understand that competition was acceptable and could benefit the market. Listening to customer complaints allowed them to feel heard and improved their comfort with the situation. The manager's ability to talk everyone back to calm restored a better shopping environment for customers.

5. New Processes and Preventive Measures

a. What are they, specifically?

The market manager now offers vendors seeking exclusive selling days advance information about when competing vendors will not be present. This allows vendors to plan attendance strategically if they prefer to avoid direct competition on specific days.

b. Are they actively maintained and discussed among market organizers?



Yes. The steering committee reviewed the situation and agreed with the market manager's approach. The committee affirmed that some competition at the market is good for business and supports the market's practice of accommodating multiple vendors with similar products.