

## CASE STUDY

# Mentor Farmers Market – A Rural Year-Round Market on the Minnesota Prairie

Greg Schweser, Community Food Systems Planner, University of Minnesota Extension Regional Partnerships  
John Sisser, Student, University of Minnesota College of Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences

May 1, 2013

## INTRODUCTION

In August of 2008, seven local food producers in Mentor, Minnesota came together to form the community's only farmers market. Now, in its fifth year, the Mentor Farmers Market has grown to over 20 producers, attracting hundreds of customers year-round. While the market's main goal is to promote local food production and consumption, the group is also actively involved in various community improvement initiatives. Despite its rural location, small population, and harsh winter climate the market has managed to thrive.

This case study addresses the following questions:

- What factors have made the Mentor Farmers Market the success it is today?
- What challenges have organizers faced along the way?
- What are producers' and organizers' goals for the market in the coming year?

### **What Is the Mentor Farmers Market?**

Mentor (population 153) is located in the heart of the Red River Valley in northwestern Minnesota, about 50 miles east of Grand Forks, North Dakota. For the last four years residents of Mentor and the surrounding area have made their way to the Mentor Community Center or a local park, ready to brave the cold winter temperatures, pouring rain, or sweltering summer heat to support local food producers at the year-round Mentor Farmers Market.

Although the customer count drops significantly during the winter months, keeping the market open year-round was an ambitious goal of the market organizers from the get-go. "The reason we wanted to go year-round is because we wanted to help people continue to eat locally," Mentor Farmers Market President Rhonda Schnacky said. "It's tough to tell people they should eat locally, and then tell them they are on their own for three months."

This focus on the consumer and customer engagement has become a defining characteristic of the market. The market offers 'Sample Days' where customers can try various goods for sale at the market or receive coupons for goods that cannot be sampled for health code purposes (like meat).

The market also hosts various educational programs that have been especially helpful in maintaining community engagement during the winter offseason. Educational topics range from basket weaving, to using natural dyes for Easter eggs, to live bait demonstrations. Food preservation demonstrations help people learn how to store and preserve their market-purchased food products.

The trend of customer engagement continues in almost every aspect of the market. Schnacky attempts to meet customer needs by offering a variety of payment methods—including credit card by using a “Square” device. As president of the market, she is also pushing for accepting Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards to expand the customer base, a major goal for her as she looks to the future.

One particular market policy is aimed at promoting customer engagement. Vendors are not allowed to leave when they sell out but are required to remain to talk with market customers. According to Schnacky, this has not been overlooked by customers. Visitors have told her their stories of attending other markets and seeing only one vendor remaining. By keeping producers on-site customers are able to have face-to-face conversations with food producers, which makes it worth their time and keeps them coming back.

The Mentor Farmers Market has sought to become a community asset. Since its founding it has focused on becoming involved in the region. From raising money to donate to city programs to participating in the “Adopt a Highway” program, the market has truly become more than just a place to purchase local foods.

The market’s rural location comes with some disadvantages as well as many benefits. Compared to larger cities, the market in Mentor does not receive as much traffic or interest, but Schnacky thinks it is a trade-off. “All of our producers are right here; we don’t have to truck them into the city,” she said. “Our market is smaller, but I think we have great variety, and in a smaller market, everybody knows everyone. We are a close-knit group.”

### **Challenges**

Over the years, Mentor’s winter markets occurred less frequently. In 2013—its fifth year—the market will close for the winter. Schnacky believes the market is still strong, but closing for the winter was a difficult decision made due to several challenges out of the farmers market’s control. While baked goods and crafts help diversify the market, the lack of vegetables during the winter has a significant impact. Although sales remained relatively consistent during the winter months making ends meet without the vegetable producers became difficult. Each vendor pays a five dollar table fee, so fewer producers mean less income for the market. “Rent (at the community center) was putting us in the hole during the winter,” Schnacky said. “Customers love to have us go year-round, but we just needed a break to recharge the batteries.”

The change of seasons brings a change in customers as well with seasonal residents residing in summer lake homes leaving for the year around September. The Mentor market relies on its location near heavily-traveled US Highway 2 and its proximity to lakes and wildlife refuges to draw in customers. As traffic in these areas decreases during the tourism off-season, so do customers.

Finally, the farmers market does not escape hustle and bustle of the winter holiday season. As consumers become busier, they have less time and spend less money at the market. “One of the challenges with a winter market is that you are competing with so many other events, like craft shows and parties,” Schnacky said.

### **Lessons Learned**

In order to operate a successful market and attract returning customers, consistent producer turnout is vital. “Getting the vendors to the market each week is a bigger challenge than you would think,” Schnacky said. “A lot of them have full time jobs and they are busy. But customers are looking for certain products and they aren’t always there.” Inconsistent producer attendance has been a struggle in developing a returning customer base.

### **Looking forward – expanding payment options**

A main goal for the market is to expand payment options for customers. Schnacky has been encouraging vendors to use a smart phone based “Square” device to accept credit cards at their booths. Though she has met with some resistance from the other vendors she’s hopeful that the success she has seen will convince others to follow suit. “When customers get to your booth at the end, many times they only have a couple dollars in cash left,” she said. “When I tell them I accept cards, they are pretty surprised and excited.”

Vendor acceptance of food stamps through EBT cards has also been met with resistance. This would require vendors to accept tokens which would be exchanged for cash once a month and the extended process for receiving payment troubles many. However, a statewide push by the Minnesota Farmers Market Association to include EBT at farmers markets may help fuel the change. “Minnesota Farmers Market Association is working with Blue Cross Blue Shield and the Department of Health and Human Services to expand EBT machines to farmers markets across the state,” Linda Kingery, Executive Director of the University of Minnesota Extension’s Northwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships, said. “It might be that in a couple of years, every market will be covered—that’s how much of a push there is for this.”

Some organizations incentivize producer acceptance of EBT. Blue Cross and Blue Shield’s Market Bucks program, for example, matches the first \$5 of EBT spent at farmers markets, helping low-income families purchase healthier, local foods and helping producers sell more of their produce. The program is expanding rapidly. In 2011, the Market Bucks program distributed over \$23,000 to producers, a 224 percent increase from the previous year (Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota, 2012).

According to Kingery, the biggest barrier to accepting EBT at farmers markets is the lack of a dependable wireless network to ensure reliable transactions. “Once there is a reliable cell-based service provider, EBT (transactions) will be almost immediate,” Kingery said. Schnacky sees this as an opportunity to attract even more customers and advance the local foods movement in upstate Minnesota. “This is a challenge for me, but this would be such a boost for our business.”

## CITATIONS

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota. (2012). EBT, Market Bucks helping more low-income Minnesotans eat better, shop farmers markets. Last Retrieved April 2, 2013 at: [http://www.bluecrossmn.com/bc/wcs/idcplg?IdcService=GET\\_DYNAMIC\\_CONVERSION&RevisionSelectionMethod=Latest&dDocName=POST71A\\_170462](http://www.bluecrossmn.com/bc/wcs/idcplg?IdcService=GET_DYNAMIC_CONVERSION&RevisionSelectionMethod=Latest&dDocName=POST71A_170462)

## PICTURES OF MENTOR FARMERS MARKET



Mentor Farmers Market President Rhonda Schnacky sells organic baked goods at her “Country Creations” tent.



Bob and Mary Nephew sell vegetables at the Mentor Farmers Market. While the use of high-tunnels can extend the vegetable growing season, the market relies on its diverse product range to attract customers through the winter months.



The Mentor Farmers Market sells more than just local foods. Elta Bietz (above) sells scarves at the market; other vendors sell jewelry, clothing, and even live bait.



The Mentor Farmers Market is more than just a place to purchase local foods. Those involved also participate in various community improvement programs, including Adopt a Highway, where they collect trash along a three-mile stretch of US Highway 2.