

Bridging the Gap between Low-income Consumers and Local Farmers

A Tip Sheet developed by the Neighborhood Market of Post Oil Solutions

Post Oil Solutions, a small non-profit organization in Southern Vermont, has been working to connect low-income consumers and local farms. Here we share our lessons-learned so that others can work towards the same goal. This “Tip Sheet” includes a brief summary of the best practices and lessons learned to more effectively bridge the gap between low-income consumers and local farmers. For more information: view our report at www.sare.org, visit www.postoilsolutions.org or contact Richard@postoilsolutions.org

TIP: Engage many community partners.

As a first step, it is crucial to know who is doing what in relation to food, nutrition, agriculture, etc. and build relationships with future collaboration in mind. One of the greatest impacts of this work has been greater awareness of the local food system and the importance of purchasing local for economic and community health. An important approach is to engage businesses, farms, government agencies, community leaders, and other community organizations. *For example, our community partners include the Vermont Dept. of Health, Youth Services, the Brattleboro Food Co-op, Brattleboro Memorial Hospital, and Commonwealth Dairy.* There is a lot of work to do and we need as many community members on board to create effective and sustainable change.

TIP: Involve low-income consumers in planning and decision making from the beginning.

Trust: Start by asking questions. *Focus groups with low-income consumers are a good way for people to voice their opinion, as well as identify potential community collaborators.* There are people who want to eat better and buy local; the real challenge is providing that food conveniently and affordably along with opportunities for education. There is a perception, often true, that local food is more expensive. There are transportation limitations to access points. There are strong cultural stigmas around using food stamps at existing Farmers Markets, and many people of low-income don't feel welcome or don't want to be at hippie/yuppie stomping grounds. There is also a general lack of knowledge and skills around purchasing, storing, and preparing seasonal produce. These barriers need to be acknowledged to build the relationships to begin moving forward. Trust is an essential component in asking for a financial commitment to behavior change.

Recruitment: A variety of marketing techniques (door knocking, newspaper, radio, flyers, tabling at events, outreach to agencies and organizations, etc) are necessary to generate interest and get people involved. *Perhaps one of the best approaches is face-to-face communication and relationship building.*



Commitment: It is important to develop a model that encourages commitment, but takes into consideration the very real barriers that people are experiencing. *The Neighborhood Market model (based on a traditional CSA) asks participants to commit to a 15 week season so that farmers can offer a lower price, however they can pay week by week.* While this works for some, it is a real challenge for people living paycheck to paycheck with uncontrollable factors like health issues, childcare, etc. There are other options like hosting the market every other week or developing buying clubs. It is important to find a plan that works for the people involved.

TIP: Find out the needs, capacity and interest of farmers in your area.

Focus: Decide from the beginning whether to focus on supporting new farmers or low-income consumers. It is a great aspiration to match these two groups; however it takes a lot of work and resources to effectively serve both. Sourcing wholesale product from larger farms and producers creates the lowest price for the consumer, although the connection between farmer and consumer may be lost.

Season extension: Many people have gardens or otherwise have access to fresh produce during the summer months, but their consumption of fresh produce doesn't start until mid-summer and essentially ends in the fall. *Several participants in the Neighborhood Market told us that when the market finished they stopped eating vegetables.* One way to begin to change this reality is that farmers who store crops or use other season extension techniques can offer early and late season access when gardens are done and fresh produce is less abundant. One idea is to organize buying clubs at schools during the school year.

TIP: Provide a variety of educational opportunities: newsletter, cooking demos, taste tests, farm visits, etc.

“Meet the Farmer”: Finding ways to connect farmers and consumers is one of the best ways to keep people coming back for more local produce. *At the Neighborhood Market there was always at least one farmer there to answer questions and talk with consumers about how the food was grown and ways to prepare it.* Another way to connect people with how their food was grown is to have photos and information about farms at the market or event.

On-Farm Activities: Getting people on the farm is an important educational opportunity, and one that will definitely increase consumer connection to local food. It is best to include an activity, such as gleanings, milking, collecting eggs, weeding, harvesting, and/or cooking.



TIP: Good coordination is essential to bringing all the complex, interrelated pieces together.

Communication: Communication and flexibility with consumers is key to their happiness. This includes opportunities for feedback. Include face to face opportunities and calling, along with flyers and emails. *Neighborhood Market project evaluation always includes informal feedback, participant and non-participant surveys, and focus groups.*

Technology: Use available technology to support the coordination process. An online ordering system saves time coordinating orders and doing bookkeeping. Farmers can post their inventory and a coordinator can place the order. *See Windham Farm and Food Network for an example of this model* <http://harvesttomarket.com/farmers-market/Windham-Farm-and-Food-Network>

Funding: The local food movement is asking for large-scale behavioral change, which is especially challenging and risky for people of low-income. Collaboration and financial resources are needed to facilitate this change in purchasing, preparation and consumption behaviors. Grants and community support are often available to those who strive to build bridges between low-income consumers and farmers. *The Neighborhood Market has received funding from local banks and businesses, small and large personal donations, NESARE, and has greatly benefitted from Americorps volunteers.*

