

School Farmers' Markets: Helping Kids and Communities Grow

School farmers' markets provide real-life experiences that let students grow socially, academically, and personally. As they plant, plan, calculate, design, and promote their produce, they practice math and communication skills while building self-confidence, a strong work ethic, and team spirit. Students and communities alike reap lessons about nutrition, health, and the value of local foods.

Before launching a school farmers' market, invite your students to ponder how, where, and to whom they'll promote it using the following activities:

IMAGINING WHAT PEOPLE WANT

A first step in promoting your market is learning about your potential customers. Invite your young entrepreneurs to explore questions such as these:

- Who do we think or hope will shop at our market? What do we know about their needs and values? Where do they shop for fresh vegetables now?
- How can our farm stand help meet their needs? (Think beyond the items you carry. For instance, consider factors such as market hours or services you might provide. Perhaps you'll deliver bags to cars, offer cooking demonstrations or set up a babysitting service so parents can more easily shop!)

SURVEYS: GETTING A READ ON CUSTOMERS

To better understand potential shoppers – and practice communication and math skills – youngsters in some schools design and administer interviews or written surveys. Here are some of the types of survey questions that might result from a class brainstorm session:

- Where do you usually shop for vegetables?
- What would convince you to come to our market?
- What would you like to see us carry at our market?
- Which of these garden items would you be likely to buy from us? What would you pay?
- Are there fresh fruits or vegetables that are important to your culture?
- Would you be interested in having recipes to go along with our garden vegetables?
- Which market hours would work best for you?

By collecting, organizing, and analyzing the results of survey data, your marketers will be better able to plan and pitch their produce and other products.

EXPLORING WHAT MAKES YOUR MARKET SPECIAL

Once you have a handle on your customers' wants and needs, invite students to think about what makes their own fresh goods unique, ask the following types of questions:

- What makes our market offerings special and desirable? Why would someone want to buy them?
- How would we describe their tastes?
- What can we say about how they will improve shoppers' lives or meet their needs?
- How will we get our customers' attention and convince them to visit the market and buy our goods? How can we make it seem too good to pass up?

As you discuss these questions, have your sales force jot down words or phrases that capture some of these ideas. They'll be able to draw on this language as they develop the market and promotional efforts. Here are some sample enticements from actual school advertisements, labels, posters, and brochures: *Nutritious and delicious, organically grown, produced with hard work and dedication, taste the sweet juices, grown by students to put food on your table, low prices, proceeds will go to support our garden program.*

Testimonials from satisfied customers singing the praises of your edibles or project can also go a long way in advertising. Consider creating a file of customer quotes from year to year. You can use them to lend weight and credibility to your pitch.

CULTIVATING SAVVY ADVERTISERS

Here's an exercise you might use to deepen students' thinking about how to promote their market:

Bring in or have students locate a variety of ads for products or services. Encourage the class to be clever detectives by zeroing in on a variety of formats: print ads, videotapes of television ads, audio tapes of radio pieces, T-shirts, and so on.

- Have pairs or small groups of students examine some samples. They should jot down which visual and language elements or techniques draw their attention.
- Discuss these types of questions as a class: Which ads hooked you most easily? Why did you choose them? What techniques did the advertisers' use to draw attention and be persuasive? Which techniques or pitches would make you look twice at a product or attend a sale? What do you think our customers would respond to?
- When youngsters later create their own promotions, they may want to employ some of the same techniques they identified.

CONSIDERING HOW AND WHERE TO PITCH YOUR MARKET

If you are planning to involve students in the "sell," also ask, *What locations and advertising formats might work well for us? Which ones can we afford? Who can help us get the word out?* Consider the following options:

- a "commercial" that airs on a school or local radio or television station
- a notice or ad in the school, PTO, or community newspaper
- letters, flyers, and coupons distributed to parents and community members
- ads posted on telephone poles or bulletin boards around town
- posters hung around school, at the local library, or in nearby stores
- a student-run presentation for a community group
- kid-made "business" cards
- school garden/market Web site
- t-shirts or stickers

Be sure to check with your state Department of Agriculture to find out if there any permit, licensing, or insurance requirements and food safety regulations you'll need to comply with as you set up and run your school famers' market.