



I Love What I do! Tips to Making a Living at the Farmer's Market - Paul Betz

I am the one who makes the decisions of what, when, and how to make my farm work. I struggle with the gazillion variables over which I have no control. Seeing those variables actually come together brings a sense of satisfaction that leaves me filled with joy. Of course, there's always a hitch. Loving what you do does not always pay the bills. If you can not sell what you produce, you can not afford to farm for very long.



My wife Kate and I are farming three acres of vegetables for a farmers market and a small CSA. We made the choice when we started that direct marketing was the way we could afford the lifestyle we wanted on the acreage we had available. We receive a better price for our produce than we would in the wholesale market, and are able to separate ourselves from the commodity field. When our customers come to us at the market, they are choosing to spend their dollars with us because we can offer them something different than they can find elsewhere. We can tell them how their food was produced, when it was harvested, why I choose the varieties we grow, and how to prepare the vegetables as well. It all sounds pretty basic, but getting to know your customers is a big step to marketing yourself better.

Before you can get to know your customers, you need to get them to stop at your booth. Arriving at a market and throwing your wares on a table does not cut it anymore. You only get a few seconds to make a positive impression. In a market filled with many vendors, there are a few things you can do to stand out. Some are obvious, some are more subtle.

Our market takes place in a parking lot on the asphalt. The first thing I do when I arrive is sweep out our spot, including the area in front where people are walking. It only takes a few minutes, but it makes a huge difference in how our stand looks. It is important to remember you are selling food, and a dirty floor with cigarette butts and grit can be a real turn off. I also arrive each morning with two shirts. One shirt always gets dirty unloading the van and setting everything up. Once the booth is ready to go, and before the crowds get there, I am changed, clean, and ready to go. Did I forget to mention that I am in my "going to town" pants?

While you have the few seconds to set an impression be engaging, and let your customers know you are happy to help them. If someone's hands are full, offer to bag for them. If you have a shady out of the way spot, allow customers to leave what they have bought and pick it up later if they are going to do more shopping. And most important...do not sit down! The first impression is that you are not excited about your products and to top it off in order to help someone, you have to stand up. Sounds basic right? But what it means to a customer is that you have to stand up for them and they are being an inconvenience to you.



Most people realize that vegetables are grown in soil. That does not mean they want to see the dirt on them. We spend a lot of time getting our produce looking good; greens are healthy, roots are clean. How you arrange your produce is also important. There's a saying "Pile it high and kiss it goodbye," and it's true. Abundance will stop people and bring them to you. If we are short on something, we use false bottoms that fit into our baskets that allow a smaller amount to rise above the rim.

Bringing more than you think you can sell hurts at first, but it is important that there always be a choice for your customers. No one wants to buy the last one of anything. It's important that every customer gets to choose. Granted, there are always some items that we run out of. But we try hard to always have something at the end of a busy day. As our produce disappears, we are busy tightening up the display, making our overall stand smaller, but still trying to appear full. A smaller stand that is neat will always be more inviting than a big stand that looks picked over.

As I am setting up my booth, I am always conscious of how far the average customer can reach. I am careful that everything I am selling is easy to pick up. For items that are loose, like beans and peas, I put them closer to the customers, so there is less fumbling with a bag. Heavier items are also closer, lighter ones farther back.

Signage is also very important. We have a sign on everything. I list varieties, what method of preparation might be best suited for that vegetable, and what I like about the variety. Every sign has a price. I think our prices are a reflection of the cost of production and the quality of the produce I bring, and I do not hide them. I began using the computer to make my signs because my handwriting is hard even for a pharmacist to read. They all have a uniform format, and when they start to look worn out, I print out new ones.

My final suggestion would be to stand outside your booth during market time and watch how the traffic flows through it. Where does it get congested? Can people find what they are looking for? Also take the time to admire the work that has gone into getting everything to market. The market season is intense, and sometimes you need a lift. Market day is a very tangible reward for all your sweat and long days.

I hope this season brings lots of success, and the continuing chance to live your dream!

Source: <http://www.highmowingseeds.com/Tips-to-Making-a-Living-at-the-Farmers-Market.html>