

Invigorating Town Centres through Alternate Local Produce Marketing Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarises key success factors and pitfalls to energise town centres through community participation / connection with direct marketing of local fresh food. The results were obtained through a half day forum initiated by the Greater Western Sydney Economic Development Board with discussion and case studies focusing on major city centres in Western Sydney. The forum workshop participants were farmers' market organisers, farmers, city centre managers and council representatives. The aim was to see how local fresh food markets or other local produce strategies could assist in reinvigorating town centre business activity while also providing an alternate market for Sydney farmers. The paper suggests that the practical knowledge of ways to implement local food strategies in town centres would be applicable to greater Sydney and other Australian town centres.

KEYWORDS: Farmers markets, local food production, town centre management.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Alternate Fresh Food Marketing Forum

In May 2008 a half-day forum was held in Penrith called Invigorating Town Centres through Alternate Local Fresh Food Marketing Strategies (Forum) which brought together business sector stakeholders interested in Sydney food systems including farmers' market organisers, farmers, city centre managers, council planners / economic development officers.

The forum was organised through the Greater Western Sydney Economic Development Board (now Regional Development Australia – Sydney) and NSW Primary Industries (now Industry & Investment NSW) focusing on major City Centres in Western Sydney, however the organisers expected that the knowledge gained would be applicable to greater Sydney and other parts of regional NSW.

‘Alternative marketing options contribute to the sustainability of small business associated with farming / value adding and assist small operators gaining price equity. Direct marketing options foster the development of urban/rural relationships where the grower/value adder and the consumer interface one on one. At the community and individual health levels there are advantages for consumers including children gaining an appreciation of the food they eat –

where it is grown, how it is grown and who grows it.

Alternative marketing mechanism/options for farmers include:

- Farmers Markets
- Farm Gate sales
- Agritourism
- Pick your own
- Fruit and vegetable box direct supply and perhaps even wholesaling
- E-commerce
- Farm stays
- Provedore services
- Slow Food
- School food programs
- Direct supply of local food to institutions such as universities and hospitals
- Corporate farm gate - a concept successfully trialled at Penrith City Council when a grower supplied strawberries to meet orders of Penrith City Council staff on a weekly basis while in season (Mason, D. 2009, pers. comm., 15 April)' (Ellerman 2009).

1.2 Town Centre Visitation

With shopping centres becoming the preferred destination for consumers the retail shopping strips are finding it difficult to compete '...businesses struggle to compete with the large Penrith Westfield complex they close on Sundays (Reed, G. pers. comm., 4 May 2009)'. 'Older shopping strips in the eastern suburbs of Sydney are suffering from the emergence of the new, glitzy Bondi Junction revamp (Mathews 2006)'. Georges (2009), notes that shopping centres appear internally-orientated reducing the activity and life of the nearby shopping strips.

Regional centres are also keen to attract visitation, Tourism Australia (2005) estimates that '...regional tourism accounts for about 60 percent of Australian domestic tourism revenue and is a major driver of economic activity in rural and outback areas.' Regional identity and branding to create consumer and trade awareness are aspects that need addressing (Knowld, Brown 2005).

1.3 Types of Invigorating Strategies for Towns

Lyson (2004) describes food systems that engage with local communities in an economic and personal way as 'civic agriculture' of which farmers markets is one form that can promote community identity.

The emergence of regular farmers markets occurred from 1999 in Australia. The Australian Farmers Market Association (2009) has 94 farmers markets listed on their web site, however more farmers markets (FM) have been established since this list was put together exemplified by additional Hawkesbury Harvest Inc. (2009) markets in Western Sydney and Jan Power's Farmers Markets (2009) in Brisbane. In comparison the USA State of Washington has 74 listings in the National Farmers Markets and Fruit Stand directory with similar numbers in other high population USA States such as California and New York (Fruitstands.com 2009), with FM increasing nationally by 2000 between the years 1994 to 2004 (Stephenson *et. al.*

2008).

There has been a big interest in documenting farmers markets since 1998 as demonstrated by the large increase in listings retrieved using Scirus (Table 1).

Scirus Search Phrase	1998	2008
farmers market	160	9,171
slow food	8	2,146
Foodie	4	566

Table 1: Scirus searches for the year 1998 and the year 2008 showing an increase in documentation reflecting aspects of farmer marketing, food production and culinary interest.

Food and wine events aim at promoting regional food such as the Mudgee Wine and Food Fair at Balmoral Beach (Mudgee Wine 2009) and the ‘taste orange @ BONDI’ event where 30 plus of Orange’s wine and food produces are showcased at Bondi Pavilion, café’s, restaurants, clubs, hotels and a book store (Brand Orange Ltd 2009a). Taste Orange also promotes locally through four seasonal events – Slow Summer, Food Week, Frostfest, Orange Wine Week and the monthly farmers market (Brand Orange Ltd 2009b).

The Slow Food movement promotes local, traditional food products and preserving family farms (Wikipedia 2009) encouraging restaurants to source local non-factory farmed produce and education through slow food festivals or tasting events.

Attraction of tourists to towns by promotion of gastronomic destinations such as Daylesford and Kyneton where visitvictoria.com (2009) advertise restaurants with Chefs Hats... historic Hotels with fine food ...city-quality espresso...shops selling regional food and wines’.

Other strategies such as agri-tourist promotions (e.g. farm-gate trails) and special events (e.g. Concerts in vineyards) may attract visitors to the region and have some flow-on to retail activity, however the scope of these activities was not a focus of the Forum.

1.4 Benefits to Farmers

Farmers and value adders are interested in improving their economic returns particularly for the small scale producers on the fringe of Sydney that have difficulty to compete in the major Sydney markets with the non-local large scale producers (Knowd, Mason & Docking 2005). Small enterprises acknowledge that to survive they need to direct market to consumers (Kambara and Shelly 2002).

The United Nations 2009 World Food Summit on food security is interested in improving farmer income to be comparable with workers income in the manufacturing and service industry sectors.

Figure 1: Food security and farmer income (United Nations 2009).

According to Hamilton (2004) farm diversification can improve profitability through a market oriented approach. Farmers apart from obtaining a retail price for their produce, increasing profit margins, they also can gather valuable comment about their produce through the face-to-face contact with the consumer (Paul 2003).

<p>Farmer / Vendor Survey 2000 65.8% contact consumers 61.1% an additional income 49.8% enjoyment & recreation 31.7% low overhead costs</p>
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Figure 2: Benefits for vendors at Alberta Farmers’ Market (Paul 2002).

1.5 Benefits to Town Centres

Surveys indicate that farmers markets are in the main complementary to nearby retailers (Coster & Kennon 2005) , Paul (2003) notes that farmers markets revive town / urban centres - in Oregon farmers markets attract shoppers to the Central Business District (CBD) and depending on the town between 30-65% also did shopping at neighbouring businesses (FOE 2000, Lev *et. al.* 2003). Farmer markets held near town shops can stimulate visitation - the monthly Farmers Market at Talbot Victoria, ‘... with a population of 300, changes the usually quite main street into a busy thoroughfare with more than 100 stalls selling local produce (visitvictoria.com, p13, 2009)’.

There are subsidiary economic and employment opportunities provided by the agricultural sector (Figure 3).

<p>The National Farmers’ Federation (NFF) submission to the Australian Government Senate Committee investigating Climate Change and the agricultural sector noted that although the ‘...agricultural sector, at farm-gate, contributes approximately 3% of Australia’s total Gross Domestic Product (GDP)... there are currently 308,000 people directly employed in Australian agriculture. However, the complete agricultural supply chain, including affiliated industries, provides over 1.6 million jobs to the Australian economy or 1-in-6 of all jobs (Aust Gov. Chapter 2, p1-2, 2008).’</p>

Figure 3: Employment benefits expanding from agricultural production.

Farmers markets can provide social benefits through informing / educating / interacting with the community about sustainability issues, for example the Seattle Farmers Market provides a space for local non-profit social service / environmental groups or other groups actively working to help farmers, gardeners and farmland preservationists to promote local programs (NFMA 2009). ‘marketumbrella.org’ (2008) survey indicated that farmers markets improved community cohesion and health.

1.6 Consumer Expectations

Quality, freshness and supporting locally grown are responses from people attending farmers markets (Paul 2003). The typical food supply chain with more linkages as Ellerman (2009) demonstrates has implications for freshness (Figure 4).

‘The typical farm to consumer produce supply chain has implications for freshness and farm profit due to:

- Time lag to get produce to consumers
- Low profit margins for farmers
- Markets dominated by a small number of buyers.
- Loss of produce quality due to over-handling or cool storage
- Shorter shelf-life
- Higher cost to consumer – due to more overheads
- Increased food miles – or the distance travelled before the food gets to the consumer (Schofield, A. 2009, pers. comm., 4 May)’.

Figure 4: Some points about the typical produce to consumer supply chain.

The promotion and branding of farmers markets gives the consumer an expectation that the produce is being sold by the farmer. O’Keefe (2008) suggests that branding and advertising is an affective mechanism to communicate non-functional attributes of product to the consumer, however maintaining reputation is critical in keeping consumers.

In NSW the control over advertising a ‘Farmers Market’ is not specifically regulated, although for sales of liquor there is a definition for a farmers market (Figure 5), however the interpretation of who can sell and what can be sold has been left to farmers market administrators to regulate.

‘NSW LIQUOR REGULATION 2008

24 Requirements relating to producers’ markets or fairs

The following requirements are prescribed for the purposes of the definition of “producers’ **market** or fair” in [section 33](#) (5) of [the Act](#):

- (a) the **market** or fair must include a minimum of 10 farmers or primary producers displaying their produce for sale directly to the public,
- (b) the **market** or fair must be promoted as being a **market** or fair at which farmers or primary producers display and sell their products directly to the public,
- (c) the primary reason for conducting the **market** or fair is to enable producers who are displaying their produce to sell directly to the public (AustLII 2009)’

Figure 5: Definition of a producers market for direct sales of farm produce.

Farmers markets and foodie events tend towards the ‘... middle / higher income earners and do not capture the wider community – the Orange farmers market is expensive compared to Harris Farms fruit and vegetable market (Fogarty, R. 2009, pers. comm., 29 June)’, although a study by Seattle University (2008) concluded that prices at a farmers market were on-par or lower than the two supermarkets surveyed. O’Keefe (2008) states that people attending farmers markets are more concerned about the non-functional attributes of food such as – where and how it is produced? (O’Keefe 2008), support for locally grown food (Paul 2002) and quality of product (Figure 6).

Consumer Survey 2000	
68.0%	freshness
62.6%	product quality
59.5%	local farmer support
50.1%	community support
43.6%	social atmosphere
27.1%	price savings
24.5%	specialty items
15.1%	organic produce
9.5%	ethnic products
9.0%	environmental reasons

Figure 6: Alberta Farmers Market Survey (Paul 2002)

According to the Food Industry Council of Tasmania consumers are becoming more discerning in their purchasing habits particularly regarding distance produce travels to consumer markets (Aust Gov 2008). However, the community support for buying local is tempered by the lack of variety of produce due to the seasonality of farm produce (Halwell 2004, Eagle, A. pers. comm., 5 Sept 2009).

1.5 Success Factors and Challenges

The infrastructure and associated organisational support to instigate farmers markets has been well documented in various farmers markets guides such as A Guide to the Establishment of Farmers; Markets in Victoria (2003), Farmer’s Market Toolkit (South Australian Government 2009) and Establishing and Operating a Community Farmers’ Market (University of Kentucky 1997).

Example Farmer Requirements	Example Town Centre / Public Requirements
Access (delivery of goods).	Authenticity – certification, signage, selling on behalf of grower, etc.
Undercover (rainproof).	Undercover (rainproof).
Power (refrigeration, etc.).	Parking (For customers, parking fees, walking distance).
Time / Value	Other attractors (eg. Cook-off, cooking demonstration, children activities, etc.).

Table 2: Shows some example requirements for farmer market setup mentioned in the literature.

Choosing a site is the top component for farmers markets and foodie events with accessibility, amenity (Table 2) and sufficient customer base documented as important factors to assess. Although providing public exposure for producers and obtaining a retail price for produce the logistics of travel / accommodation and dealing face-to-face with the public does not suite all farmers or farm produce marketing plans (pers. obs.).

Farmer market failure has been investigated by Stephenson et.al (2008) they noted the following contributing factors:

- Operating less than 5 years,
- Small markets with few vendors (5-20) are vulnerable,
- Lack of basic product categories particularly fruit and vegetables, fish, meat and value-added products.
- Market manager is a volunteer or paid a low income - usually due to less revenue from small number of vendors,
- High market management turnover and for new FM's managers with less experience.

The Victorian Department of Primary Industries (2003) recommends that FM are established as community-based organisations run as not-for-profit, however privately run FM also exist – whether community owned or privately owned is more successful is unknown, however in Parramatta (Sydney) the local council did step in to support the FM when the private FM operator was not performing.

2. METHOD

The objectives of the Forum were to find out what are the key success factors and pitfalls to:

- Energise public spaces and visitation of city / town centres through community participation / connection with direct marketing of local fresh food .
- Encourage agri-business participation by the many small farms and value adding farm produce businesses through local farmer markets and food events.
- Provide an alternate market / retailing option for Sydney farmers.

The rationale for the Forum was that:

- Sydney having a population of 4.4 million (ABS 2009) has enormous potential to increase the viability of small to medium agricultural producers and value-added product businesses particularly in the Sydney region and likewise in other NSW regional centres.
- Activities connecting urban and rural agricultural sectors provide diversity for communities, increases awareness of local food systems and provide social / public health benefits (Figure 7).

Action HF 8: The NSW Government, working with Local Government, will have objectives and measures included in land use planning strategies and policies to support access to fresh foods in local communities. This will involve provisions in planning instruments to protect and maintain significant local food production and agricultural activity.

Figure 7: Action from NSW Department of Health preventing obesity strategy (NSW Government 2009, p12).

- Improve town centre economic viability and vibrancy through increased visitation and promotion.
- Addresses the NSW Primary Industries Sydney's Agriculture: Planning for the Future Forum recommendation to influence farm economic sustainability via linking consumers with local farm producers using alternative marketing strategies (NSW DPI 2008).

Presenters were selected by their experience with the promotion / participation of either farmers markets or fresh food related events. The presentations and short discussion at the conclusion of the proceedings were documented. A summary of the Forum and presentations

approved to publish were made available on the GWSEDB Website
<http://www.gws.org.au/page.asp?id=66> .

3. RESULTS

3.1 Forum

The forum RSVP included the following participants (Table 1).

Centre Management	Farmers Market / Food Events	Farmers / Retailers	Council / Agency Economic Development / Management	Council Planners	Agency / Inst. Representing Primary Industries
3	9 ¹	9	17	7	4
Total					49

Table 3: Range of interest groups attending Forum.

There were representatives from five western Sydney councils, the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet, and the Office of the Minister for Western Sydney.

3.2 Alternate fresh food marketing

One case study reviewed was the Hawkesbury Harvest Farmer’s Market at Rouse Hill Town Centre. The market is held on the fourth Saturday of the month and Martin Ollis (2009) the Centre Manager said ‘...the farmers market day attracted 3000 to 5000 additional visitors...’. Mr Ollis’s noted that ‘...the farmers market did not compete with the retailers as consumers tended to go to the farmers market then to other retail shops for additional items or services...’. Even a small town such as Carnarvon in Western Australia with a population of 5,000 attracts tourists and locals to the Gascoyne Farmers Market (Payet *et. al.* 2003) which reported a peak attendance of 2,500 people.

▪ Raise awareness and build loyalty/repeat visitation to the markets and Rouse Hill town centre

Figure 8: Rouse Centre Management Farmers Market Objective (Ollis 2009).

However another farmers market that did not fare well for the farmer was the Hawkesbury Harvest St Mary's Cathedral Square: Farmers & Fine Food Market in Sydney CBD. The farmers market was held on Fridays and aimed to capture the city office worker². Alan Eagle (2009, pers. comm., 4 May) secretary of Hawkesbury Harvest acknowledged that the market attracted people for a lunch destination however due to the difficulty for city workers to cool store produce in the office and lug bags of produce home on public transport only small amounts were sold making it unviable for the farmer who had travelled sometimes long distances.

¹ Includes one farmer who organises farmers markets and three journalists.

² When the Rocks Farmers Market in Sydney started a shuttle bus was provided to attract city workers to attend the FM.

Jane Adams, Chair of the Australian Farmer’s Markets Association noted some popular FM (Figure 9) and described success criteria for farmers markets including:

- Ensuring produce has come direct from the farm
- Regularity of market and quality of produce
- Wet weather options and availability of parking
- Professional / commercial approach to farmer market management,³

and FM that are popular (Figure 9).

Some popular farmers markets:	
• Castle Hill: Farmers & Fine Food Market	2 nd Sat each Month
• Rouse Hill Town Centre: Farmers and Fine Food Market	4 th Sat each Month
• Eveleigh Market	Saturdays
• The Rocks Market	Sat & Sun
• Wauchope Farmers’ Market	4 th Sat each Month
• Kingston Farmers’ Markets (VIC)	1 st Sat each Month
• Adelaide Showground Farmers Market	Every Sunday
• Albany Farmers Market (WA)	Every Saturday
• Gascoyne Growers Market Carnarvon (WA)	Every Sat – May to Oct.

Figure 9: Shows some popular farmers markets and regularity (Adams, J. 2009, pers. comm., 4 May).

The FM at Parramatta had the objectives to increase activity in the CBD to create a more vibrant public space. The promotion of fresh produce was seen to not adversely impact existing businesses and initially there were concerns by local retailers however they now embrace the FM as they obtain some flow-on benefits

• **Council wished to see increased activity in the CBD. One way of doing this was to introduce markets**

Figure 10: Parramatta City Council outcome and strategy for starting a Farmers Market (Montgomery, S. pers.comm., 4 May 2009).

Brand Orange formed initially to increase visitation (Figure 11) and market the wine growing district of Orange in the Central Tablelands of NSW. The Taste Orange brand and organisation has now widened to promote other produce / events and the region with over 270 members. The target area is within 2 hour drive from Orange, however major events attract visitation from Sydney and Canberra a 3 hours drive. Using an on-line booking system estimates were obtained of increase in visitation of 500% between the years 2007 and 2008.

Increase **visitation** numbers and **average spend**

Figure 11: Taste Orange marketing objective (Currie, K. pers. comm., 4 May 2009).

One of the objectives of the Slow Food movement is to have a closer connect between the consumer and the producer. Champion, M. (pers. comm.. 4 May 2009) highlighted that without preserving local food districts near urban areas it will be more difficult for this

³ A comprehensive guide on the establishment of farmers markets was published by the Victorian Department of Primary Industries in 2003.
[www.dpi.vic.gov.au/dpi/nrenti.nsf/LinkView/.../\\$file/Farmers%20Market%20Guide.pdf](http://www.dpi.vic.gov.au/dpi/nrenti.nsf/LinkView/.../$file/Farmers%20Market%20Guide.pdf)

connection to occur. Examples were shown of strategies to preserve farmland including the Agricultural Park near Milano Italy and the Agricultural Farmland Trust in California USA. Schofield, A. (pers. comm. 4 May 2009) also stated that land planning policy will need to recognise the contribution of city fringe farmers' support of local food distribution initiatives to encourage the farmers to stay in the area. A suggested solution to assist in the education and support for farms near cities is to have a 'local food' brand similar to Toronto's 'Buy Local' brand.

3. DISCUSSION

The challenge in Sydney, with a population of 4.4 Million people, is that there are too few farmers for the expanding farmers markets that councils and entrepreneurs wish to establish. Farmers' market management are starting to compete for farmers (Adams, J. pers. comm., 4 May 2009)⁴ which can tempt managers to let farmer authenticity slip. The FM at Sydney's The Rocks is looking to entice '...30 to 40 more farmers to the market (Dawson, D. pers. comm., 7 Oct 2009)', however the city site fees are higher than regional FM according to one grower (ABC Rural 2009).

Hawkesbury Harvest Inc. (HH) is aware that farmers have constraints for direct selling at FM due to balancing demands of farming and time required to travel and attend FM, therefore HH allow for one farmer to on-sell their farmer colleagues produce (Eagle, A. pers comm. 20 Aug 09).

The complexity of what is genuine farm produce is often not well defined for the consumer at the farmers markets. Signage may assist to inform the consumer (Figure 12). It is administratively difficult for farmers' market management to enforce standards (Stegelin 1997) and can lead to thorny situations on market day. Jane Adams (2009, pers. comm., 4 May) advocates that an independent organisation should oversee the auditing and compliance of farmers markets as is being proposed by the Victorian Department of Primary Industries.

Activities such as FM or foodie events can attract large numbers to towns or business centres, the Penrith (Sydney) FM held outside Westfield Shopping Centre attracted 3000 people at the inaugural FM. The Rouse Hill FM stimulates on average an extra 2,000 visitors to the Rouse Hill Shopping precinct and foodie events such as the Camden (south western Sydney) Food, Wine and Music Festival had an estimated 4000 people attend in 2008. Food expos also can attract large numbers of visitors - Sydney's Darling Harbour Good Food & Wine Show attracted 300 exhibitors and 53,000 visitors in 2008 (Schofield, A. *pers. comm.* 4 May 2009) and HOFEX in Hong Kong attracted 1800 companies and 32,479 trade visitors in 2009 (http://www.hofex.com/previous_09_ov.html).

The English have embraced slow food events with, according to VisitBritain (2009) thousands attending the annual Ludlow Slow Food festival.

⁴ Workshops in September 2009 were held supported by the Sydney Harbour Foreshores Authority (SHFA) to attract regional farmers to participate in city based farmers markets (Benson, M. pers comm. 8 Sept 2009).



Figure 12: Genuine grower and producer Penrith farmers market (Docking 2009).

Surveys such as (Lev *et. al.* 2003) and data from FM and shopping centre counters provide some evidence that local fresh food markets do attract visitation to town centres. Flow-on sales to nearby retailers depends on the timing and proximity of the farmers' market / food event to retail shops (Lev *et. al.* 2003). To obtain retailer acceptance of the Parramatta FM management encouraged a local café to provide a coffee service / cart for FM customers.

Farmers' markets provide farmers with not only an alternative revenue stream, rather than selling at a central market, it also provides linkages between urban and rural communities and is seen by town centre management as a positive urban place making (Montgomery, S. pers. comm., 4 May 2009). The social engagement between shoppers and farmers at FM was acknowledged by these groups as important (Feenstra 2007). Visually attractive retail / markets stimulating social interaction are important factors that contribute to the shopping experience Paul (2002), Rochecouste (2009).

4. Conclusions

The Forum and references both noted the increasing problem of many farmers markets and not enough farmers either interested or able to participate - the challenge of managing supply and demand will continue if more FM's are proposed by communities. Reduced number of stallholders reduces the product variety which is particularly important for basic food items such as fruit and vegetables (Stephenson 2008) and also reduces competition for prices at the FM (Eagle, A. *pers. comm.*, 4 May 2009). Authenticity of FM was also seen as a main issue.

The Forum also raised similar issues to the references regarding successfully attracting customers to fresh food events such as regularity, choice of time, day, accessibility and whether there is tension with local retailers (Stephenson 2008). The atmosphere and visual amenity can also increase the value of the experience for shoppers and tasters. The Forum

also noted that FM's that aimed to attract office workers raised problems of cool storage of perishable food and carrying home produce particularly if using public transport.

The professional approach to FM management noted at the Forum is consistent with Stephenson (2008) who recommended that organisers need to have a plan to move from voluntary to paid FM management when the number of stall holders increases (greater than about 16) to a level that requires more than a day's work for the volunteer.

Where raising revenue is difficult, fresh food events may need financial or in-kind support from government or private organisations (Stephenson 2008), this was apparent in the literature and by cases at the Forum such as support by the Australian Federal and NSW Government for the establishment of Hawkesbury Harvest Inc., Brand Orange marketing and the support from a development company (Lend Lease) for the design of the Rouse Hill FM site.

FM held near retail shopping can attract visitors and, according to practitioners at least 30% of attendees' provide flow-on sales for nearby retailers. Food expos and 'slow food' events can also increase visitation to a regions / town / city centres and may result in flow-on retail sales particularly for the hospitality industry. More data is needed to confirm the extent of flow-on retail sales for these fresh food events

Land use planning to maintain local farms and design of town centres to provide public spaces for farmers markets and food events was stated as an issue that needs to be considered for planning of new urban centres.

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