

**Is Your Farm Organic?  
Building Consumer Relationships**  
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Key words: food system, farmers market, relationships

**Author's Background**

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**Summary**

The world food system is broken, the most prosperous nations are experiencing epidemics related to what they eat, fresh produce is not available for some people, and farmers growing organic food face many challenges within systems that don't always support them. This presentation puts a lens on the United States food system, farmers who grow organic food, and what needs to happen in order to transform the food system. The central thesis is that the relationship between the farmer and the consumer is a key component of the solution. A prime opportunity for contact and building these relationships is at the farmers' market.

**Background**

The food system is broken where it counts the most. Our nutritional needs are compromised by the way food is grown, processed, and distributed. While it can be argued that the food system is not solely responsible for the health crisis in the United States, its impact on diet can not be denied. America has seen an unprecedented increase in obesity and related health consequences including diabetes, heart, and cardiovascular disease. The American diet is deplorable for some. Americans consume too much sweetened carbonated beverages; too many processed foods high in salt, fat, and/or sugar; too much meat; and not enough fresh fruits and vegetables. Further impeding optimal health benefits for those who do choose fruits and vegetables is the availability of fresh organic produce. In parts of the United States, large grocery store chains accommodate an American public that is used to having access to just about any kind of food at any time regardless of season. This equates to produce that is not organic, potentially genetically modified, and old, because it has been shipped hundreds if not thousands of miles from where it was grown. Food is grown for its appearance, shipping capacity, and shelf life

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rather than for nutrition. This has affected the availability of diverse produce and many consumers are not even aware of this. They go to the store and buy a basket of strawberries, not realizing what chemicals were used on them or that there are many different varieties of strawberries that will never be found in a grocery store. Diet is an important factor; if not the most important factor, it certainly is one of them. And if diets need to be improved, one doesn't need to be a nutritionist to know that more fruits and vegetables are the prescriptions: organically grown—the fresher the better.

Determining and understanding the obstacles between farmer and consumer is complicated. Access to fresh food is a big concern. The term “food desert” has been used to describe geographic areas where access to fresh food is limited because of the types of shops, the high risk involved when selling perishable produce, and the availability of transportation for consumers who wish to buy fresh fruits and vegetables. Often, fast food restaurants and stores with processed convenience foods are more readily available than stores and restaurants with fresh fruit and vegetables. Even if fresh food is available, barriers remain. Americans love fast food and convenience, and they don't like to pay a lot for produce. Then the issue becomes one about lifestyle, awareness, and knowledge. Generations are growing up without awareness of certain types of fresh foods and without learning how to prepare food from scratch. They do not know that the best way to get nutrition is from fresh produce. If you want soup, do you open a can or do you take the time to chop up the vegetables and make it yourself? There is a disconnect between producer and consumer. There are very few opportunities in which the person who grows the food gets to talk to the person who eats the food. Being able to have that conversation and maybe even establish a relationship requires a bridge. The farmers market is a place where this can happen.

Fortunately, there has been a positive trend in the United States. There has been an increase in farmer's markets, small farms—many of which choose to grow using organic methods, women farmers, and farms extending their growing season by using tunnels and greenhouses. Smaller farmers that tend to sell at farmers markets grow a variety of food as opposed to larger farms that grow large quantities of just a few crops. When the farmer can sell directly to the consumer in these types of circumstances, conversations about growing practices can occur. When a farmer is asked several times each market about whether they use chemical spray on their produce, they get the message that the consumer does not want conventional or non-organic produce. These conversations about food, growing practices, and systems lead to relationships between the farmer and the consumer. It really is about trust. Does the consumer trust the farmer to be honest with his or her answers, and is the farmer trustworthy? When other consumers hear these conversations, they become more aware as well. They might not have considered asking those questions. This relationship can also foster the production of foods that are not available at the stores anymore. The consumer has direct access to the people who can and will grow the vegetables that his or her grandmother used to grow. The stronger this relationship, the more sustainable the practice of producing food to be consumed in season, without being shipped long distances, will be.

In order to address the problems of access, one must not only consider proximity but also economics. Individuals who live in neighborhoods labeled food deserts may also have low incomes and need government assistance to purchase food. If there is a farmers market, is it financially, socially, and culturally accessible to the consumer? Problems with technology that facilitates the use of government assistance may be one barrier. But even if this is overcome, will people with low income come to the market? Will they find the foods that they want, and will they be able to afford fresh fruit and vegetables? Again, a farmer/consumer relationship can address these issues. Farmers can grow different foods if they know that the consumer wants them. In the case of financial constraints, the farmer and the consumer can be allies in promoting systems that support both of them. Examples of this include grant programs that double governmental assistance if the consumer chooses to purchase food at a farmers market and markets that recruit new farmers, even to grow in urban areas.

### The Farmers Market

The local farmers market is one place to see examples of the great things that are happening on smaller farms. Sometimes this is the only place they sell their food. These farmers are different from large scale farmers in their relationship to the land and their investment in the food they grow. Recently during a farm tour, a student asked, "Do you eat the food that you grow?" What a strange question, I thought. Of course we do. A large scale farmer might not answer that question the same way. They don't eat what they produce and they won't ever meet the people who do. The difference is in lifestyle and commitment to a cause. They are committed to making food that is fresher, healthier and more diverse available to the general public. This commitment is reflected in the fact that the small scale farmer takes more risks, has less insurance in the case of crop failure and has a greater chance of success if they undervalue their own labor. This equates to a lot of hard work. You can see it on their faces and their hands. We drive past acres of corn and soybean farms on the way to the farmer's market. At 6 am tents are going up and produce is being unloaded. The produce is most likely to have been picked within 24 hours and the biodiversity even from one farm is astounding. While the food is amazing, the whole thought of growing food for market is somewhat radical from a business sense. Are these even real farmers? In the context of government subsidies and the agribusiness model of mono-crop efficiencies, "truck farmers," those who grow produce to truck to market, are really quite marginalized. But, right now, these farmers are doing what is best for the food system and right now, the farmer's market is essential to bridging farmers to consumers and consumers to farmers.

### Constructing and Maintaining Farmer/Consumer Relationships

The market gives the time and place for the farmer and consumer to meet and establish a relationship. This does not always come naturally for the farmer (or the consumer). It is out of the ordinary to have such an opportunity. Some suggestions for cultivating this relationship come from my unique experience as both a social worker and a farmer. First impressions are lasting so making yourself approachable and welcoming is essential.

Ironically, it is the fast food industry that taught me the most about customer service. They teach their workers to say, "Welcome... and May I help you?" They teach the customer is always right and to always say, "Thank you, come again" or "Have a nice day." Making eye contact, saying hello, smiling are all things that help make a good first impression. You want them to be so happy with you and your produce that not only do they come back for more; they bring a friend with them too.

Next, is starting the conversation about the food and how it is grown. Often the consumer will do this by asking, "Are you organic?" How questions are answered will have a direct influence upon the relationship. Most importantly, the farmer should demonstrate integrity, providing as much information as possible. Encourage the consumer to ask questions. Explaining what is done, how, sharing the experience of growing produce is very powerful. There has to be trust so it goes without saying that the farmer needs to be honest. The consumer is placing their trust in the farmer to grow their food. This is a tremendous responsibility and should not be taken lightly.

Consumers may seem skeptical or suspicious. Becoming defensive will only harm the relationship. It may be difficult, for example, if the consumer does not approve of the prices. Becoming defensive and telling them to go somewhere else will probably make them go somewhere else. Instead, gently, tactfully, ask them what they think the produce should cost. Then consider giving it to them to try at that cost or give them a free sample. Next week, they may come back.

The farmer needs to stand behind their product. If the consumer returns unhappy, this can damage the relationship but not as much as if it is handled poorly. For example, a consumer buys a melon and they find it unripe. They bring it back to the farmer the next week or they tell the farmer their displeasure. At that moment the farmer must regain the consumer's trust. Defensiveness does not help. A refund, another melon, or other product makes good business sense. Making sure that the consumer is happy and feels treated fairly, not cheated is crucial.

Ask them questions and listen, listen, listen. Ask them how they like to prepare the Kale they just purchased. Share recipes. Many of the people who shop at the market are there because they have had some life experience that pointed them to eating healthier. For example, they may have had a bout with cancer. Many are educated and aware. They are on a quest to find fresh organic produce. So finding out about their interests completes the establishment of the bridge. The farmer and consumer are no longer farmer and consumer. They are just two people that have a common interest and mission.

Show respect and caring. Politeness is important of course. As weeks go by, faces become more familiar. Names are learned and parts of lives touch. Share stories of struggles and relish in the joys life brings. The farmer shares about how the draught has made harvesting potatoes difficult and the potatoes are so small they are hardly worth the effort but then the weather has been just right for the apples which are amazing. The consumer shares about how her husband lost his job but they still have each other and

their baby boy. Give a little. Spontaneous acts of kindness contribute to keeping this relationship strong and meaningful. Always express gratitude.

Maintaining the relationship bridge is fostered by the benefits or rewards each person takes away. The benefit of the relationship really goes beyond monetary gains for the farmer or healthy eating for the consumer. Nothing is more rewarding to the organic farmer than to know that the food that they are giving their children is the best it can be and there is no poison on it. Selling at the farmers market extends this reward to sharing with other people's children. Small children need a free sample of cherry tomatoes, strawberries, a pear or a cucumber. Sometimes grown-ups need a free sample too.

The second most rewarding thing about growing and selling organic produce at the farmers market is finding the most committed consumers. These are the ones that have their own gardens or would if they could. These are the ones that are aware of the food system problems. These are also the ones that will ask the most questions and scrutinize everything but once the bridge is made they are also the most loyal.

The final suggestion for establishing and maintaining the bridge between farmer and consumer is fostering the sense of community amongst farmers. Then it's about bridges between farmers and consumers. This means that the farmers are joined together as one force. New farmers are warmly welcomed when they join the market. More experienced farmers are respected and offer advice and guidance. The market place is vulnerable to problems around competition for consumer dollars. It should never be about competition over consumer relationships. Even though farmers do compete, it is a fact; it does not have to be nasty. A sense of community comes when farmers jump to help each other, share ideas and growing tips, trade their products and refer consumers to each other. If I run out of arugula, I know that another farmer still has some and I can send them on. The act of referral extends trust and may help to build another bridge to another farmer.

### Joining Forces

Farmers and consumers join forces in the fact that they need each other to sustain the supply of fresh organic produce. This is one bridge that can lead to others such as bridges from traditional systems and future systems. Optimistically, farmers markets will continue to grow or perhaps other alternatives for bridging and connecting farmers and consumers will emerge from these relationships. Bridges need to be built, for example, in educational programs, employment programs, growing practices, specialty grocery shops. In the United States there needs to be governmental support for consumers and small farmers. A bridge that joins stakeholders is a step towards creating the influence upon policy.

There are a lot of really great things beginning to happen on smaller farms in the United States and there is already a trend towards more farmers markets. In order to sustain this trend and to increase access of fresh organic produce to even more consumers, farmers must cultivate relationships with their consumers. It doesn't have to be fancy websites

and high cost marketing. It's really just about showing integrity in the face to face conversations that occur at the farmers markets. It's about joining forces for a better food system.