

Serving Food Stamp Clients at Farmers' Markets: a Portland, Oregon Case Study

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Abstract

Objective: The aim of the article is to explore how to better position farmers' markets to appeal to people who rely on food stamps. It is based on a qualitative study of food stamp clients' grocery preferences and related perceptions of farmers' markets in Portland, Oregon.

Method: Researchers conducted brief qualitative interviews with 108 food stamp customers while respondents were waiting for appointments at Department of Human Services (DHS) offices in Portland.

Results: Low fresh produce consumption is the top barrier to serving low-income shoppers at Portland's farmers' markets. In our sample, income constraints appeared to compound the perception that produce is expensive. Beyond price, market organizations and public health advocates alike have to combat perceptions of produce, especially vegetables, as complicated and time-consuming to prepare.

Our study shows that increased produce consumption does not guarantee increased farmers market use due to views of markets as expensive and inconvenient.

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Over the past 30 years markets have emerged as a lifeline for America's small farms. From 1994 to 2004, the number of markets in the United States more than doubled from 1,755 to 3,706.ⁱ In 1992 Congress mandated that states transition from paper food stamps to electronic benefits transfer cards by 2002. Without the resources to accept electronic transactions, small market farmers could no longer accept food stamps. Today, farmers' market organizations across the country are investing in technology and programs to manage food stamp transactions for their farmers. While providing low-income shoppers with access to healthy local foods, market organizations aim to direct a portion of the estimated \$28.6B food stamps dollars spent each month to the farmers they serve.ⁱⁱ

The purpose of this article is to explore how to better position farmers' markets to appeal to people who rely on food stamps. It is based on a 2005 study which investigated the barriers to attracting low-income shoppers to farmers' markets in Portland, Oregon.

Located in Oregon's Willamette Valley, Portland enjoys a unique confluence of grocery store options, locally-grown produce, and farmers' markets. It is the largest city in Oregon, one of the only states to see an increase in farms over the last 20 years. Agriculture and related food processing activities represent 10% of the gross state product, second only to high tech as an industry cluster.ⁱⁱⁱ Oregon's fastest growing agricultural segment is small farms cultivating less than 50 acres.^{iv}

Oregon also ranks consistently among the top 10 states with the highest hunger rate in the nation.^v Oregon's food insecurity rates are higher for three categories that are not usually at risk, two-income households, two-parent households with children, and male blue-collar workers.^{vi} Portland is home to 15% of Oregonians and receives 22% of

the state's food stamp benefits.^{vii}

There is a high concentration of farmers' markets in the Metro-Portland area. These markets provide a direct sales outlet to over 550 Oregon and Southwest Washington vendors, most with operation within a 60-mile radius of Portland's center.^{viii} Portland's markets limit the majority of their offerings to fresh and lightly processed local foods. In 2005, six of Portland's ten inner city markets and seven of its 28 Metro markets accepted the Oregon Trail card, the state's electronic benefits card for food stamp clients.

Case Study Background

As part of an initiative to increase food stamp use at Portland's farmers markets, *The Price of Eating Right* study investigated Oregon Trail clients' grocery shopping choices, mealtime habits, and farmers' market experiences. Using a qualitative interview process, researchers asked open-ended questions to 108 food stamp customers while respondents were waiting for appointments at Department of Human Services (DHS) offices in Portland. Conversations were generally limited to 15-20 minutes. Interviews were conducted during July and August, at the height of the farmers' market season. Note that in August alone, participating DHS offices served over 13,500 households representing \$2.3 million food stamp dollars.^{ix} The goal of the research was to capture perceptions of the barriers to using farmers' markets and opportunities for improving markets to better serve this group. The sample size is not statistically significant, however numbers have been included in a discussion of findings to add color and clarification.

Demographics

Study participants were primarily Caucasian women between the ages of 26-45. Eighty respondents were female. The ethnicity of the sample aligns with the broader Portland demographics and reflects the neighborhoods served by participating DHS offices. The largest groups represented were Caucasian (61), Hispanic (18), and African-American (16). Nineteen were recent immigrants and 17 spoke English as a second language. A broad range of ages were represented although there were no participants over 65 years of age.

Family households represented two thirds of the sample, split almost evenly between single parents and couples. More than half of the family households had children under the age of three.

Participants were low-income individuals in a range of life situations: 38 single parents, 16 ESL immigrants, 10 students, 32 working, 3 residents of transitional housing, and 3 homeless individuals. Although the federal food stamp program is meant to supplement clients' grocery budgets, 72 respondents described food stamps as their primary or only grocery funds. The average food stamp allocation in Oregon in 2004 was \$84 per person per month.^x In line with Oregon Food Bank's research, most participants described running out of food stamps during the third week of the month.^{xi}

Findings: Grocery Store Preferences

Respondents' top motivation for preferring a particular grocery store was price. Forty-six participants described shopping at a grocery store because it offered lower prices. Other store attributes such as convenience, quality, and variety were secondary. Only four respondents described themselves as in a position to purchase the food they prefer without considering price.

“I shop WinCo (a Northwest grocery chain) at 102nd because it has good prices. The best prices are at Super Wal-Mart in Vancouver. If I could afford petrol (gasoline), I would shop there. It is so cheap and worth the drive.”

Convenience followed price as a top criteria for choosing a grocery store. Convenience meant a number of things to respondents: closer to home, open 24 hours, one stop shop, or close to public transportation. More than half of the group walked, cycled, or used public transportation to get to the grocery store.

“I shop at Safeway on MLK because it is nearby, less than a mile from my home. If I have a car, I drive over to the Super Wal-Mart in Vancouver. They have good discounts on lots of foods.”

Overall, 31 respondents reported shopping two or fewer times and 59 shopped four or fewer times per month. Respondents with children, a group prone to bargain shop, were likely to shop less frequently. Forty-four of 70 parents claimed to limit grocery trips to 1-4 times per month. Those who shopped most often tended to describe themselves as having very little money for groceries. Respondents in this group were likely to purchase food meal to meal.

Twenty-eight participants discussed using community food resources such as food pantries or boxes to get through the month. Participants in this group reported dining out rarely if ever, characterizing even fast food chains as too costly for their budgets.

Findings: Purchasing Motivators

According to a 1998 study, *Why Americans Eat What They Eat*, all income groups consider price and convenience when grocery shopping, but the poor give these factors the most weight.^{xiii} Although most Americans do not consume the USDA's

recommended daily allowance of fruits and vegetables, low-income populations consume the least produce.

Fifty-three respondents discussed the role of promotions in determining grocery purchases. Very few respondents mentioned relying on a grocery list. Respondents were more likely to describe purchasing a routine short list of staples by memory and basing the majority of grocery purchases on available coupons and in-store specials. Thirty-four of these 53 “value shoppers” were parents.

“I use in-house circulars from WinCo. I go to marked-down items first and then work from my list.”

When asked how they stretch their food dollars, respondents mentioned bulk purchases, higher calorie-per-dollar items such as canned tuna and peanut butter, and a number of inexpensive, long shelf-life foods like pasta, rice, ramen, dried beans, and frozen dinners. It is important to note that manufacturer promotions, by their nature, favor packaged foods.

“We buy cheaply and eat a lot of spaghetti and sauce and frozen food from Trader Joe’s.”

Single moms and participants without children were more likely to describe habits based on packaged or prepared foods. Many parents in this group described the need for easily prepared inexpensive one-dish meals such as mac ‘n cheese, pot pies, and TV dinners.

“I might boil and mash vegetables for the baby because it is more nutritious than buying jarred food. I eat meat, veggies, and rice, but I’m in school full-time, so more often I’ll toss a pot pie in the oven for myself.”

Very few respondents included menu planning in their descriptions of grocery shopping and or mealtime habits. Planners were limited to parents who discussed habits based on a set of meals that might best be described as standards.

“It’s about wise shopping...I have a typical list of 10-15 meals that I cook regularly that I know how to buy cheaply.”

Findings: Produce Consumption

Participants reported consuming very little fresh produce. Eighty-one percent claimed to have three or fewer servings of fruits or vegetables in any form and most consume one or less item that was purchased fresh.

It is interesting to note that produce consumption in Oregon is down from 1994, a period that saw a major leap in new farmers’ markets. Oregon is in line with the rest of the United States on consumption trends.^{xiii} Seventy-seven percent of Americans do not consume the USDA’s recommended five servings per day.^{xiv}

When purchasing produce, most respondents stated they are more likely to purchase fresh fruit and frozen or canned vegetables. Sixty participants were asked what would motivate them to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables. Thirty-eight out of 60 responded with comments about price. This group expressed a strong desire to eat more fresh foods and frustration with their financial limitations.

“We have juice at breakfast. We eat a fruit or vegetable three or four times a week. We would eat more if we had more money.”

Some respondents also described produce, primarily vegetables, as inconvenient. Inconvenient included a number of factors such as requiring too much storage space, spoiling too quickly, or taking too much time to prepare. A few participants perceived

themselves as lacking time and skills to cook fresh produce. These findings align with findings from *Why Americans Eat What They Eat*'s conclusion that people who eat few fruits and vegetables do so because they are inconvenient compared to other food options.^{xv}

“Vegetables are harder for me. I am always stocking up on fruit. We have fruit for breakfast every day and sometimes veggies at dinner. Vegetables take more prep and they don't seem to last as long.”

Those consuming more produce discussed the health of their children, personal health, pregnancy, and eating traditions as motivations. For respondents, children's health was far and away the most significant motivator for prioritizing fruits and vegetables.

“I eat more fruits than I used to and vegetables. I stay away from fast food. I try to put well-rounded meals on the table and make sure my kids take vitamins.”

Mothers described eating healthier while pregnant, relying on more convenience foods with newborns and toddlers, eating more produce with young children, then falling back on more convenience options with teenagers. Parents stressed that their children's preferences motivated grocery purchases.

“My diet changed when I had my son. I grew up fast. My family ate very poorly when I was young...My son is a self-proclaimed vegetarian. Trying to find protein that isn't meat was a challenge.”

“With teenagers, everybody is on the move-- everyone eats separately, what they want-- kids make pizza, tamales, cheese toast. I make a meal once or twice a week that everyone shares.”

Although this reflects a small sample, it is interesting to note higher produce consumption among immigrant families, who were likely to cite ethnic traditions as their motivation. Graduate students were also high consumers aligning with research that ties produce consumption to education.^{xvi}

Findings: Farmers' Markets

At the time of the study, efforts to accept food stamps at area markets were in their infancy. The 2005 market season was the first full season for all but 2 of 7 Metro-Portland markets accepting food stamps. Few study participants were aware they could use Oregon Trail at farmers' markets. This represented a significant barrier to food stamp use as most respondents relied on food stamps as their primary grocery budgets.

Most (97) respondents did not rely on farmers' markets as a regular grocery resource. Forty-six participants had shopped markets over the 2005 season, but only 11 were regular market shoppers. Fifty had never been to a Portland-area farmers market and 36 had never shopped a farmers market anywhere.

When asked why they did not use farmers' markets regularly, 20 of the 35 participants who occasionally shopped markets, mentioned price as the main barrier. They perceived farmers' markets as too expensive for their budgets and at the very least, more expensive than traditional grocery options.

“Markets offer higher quality produce than grocery stores, but prices are unreasonable.”

“Farmers markets are for rich people. Markets need to change their organic stress to ‘fresh from the farm, top of the line local food is good for you.’”

The second most common barrier was the limited hours and locations of Portland's markets. Consistent with motivations to frequent a grocery store, convenient location was a common reason to try a farmers' market. Based on zip code reporting, 9 of the regular shoppers and 35 occasional shoppers lived within approximately two miles of a market.

"They (farmers' markets) should be more days and more convenient. They are tough to fit into a schedule. Once a week isn't enough."

Respondents were also challenged by the variety and availability of products available at farmers' markets. Most respondents did not shop seasonally. Most valued purchasing the foods they like year-round. Note that of the five most commonly mentioned fruit and vegetable purchases, apples, bananas, greens (lettuces, mustard greens, kale, and turnip greens), tomatoes, and corn, all but bananas, are grown locally in Oregon.

"I don't use markets, because I don't like not finding what I want."

Some described farmers' markets as difficult to use versus a grocery store citing crowds, comparison-shopping between multiple growers, and long lines as market weaknesses. For three recent immigrants, language barriers added to the complexity of using markets.

"The growers should let people know what they are out of so we don't wait in line in a crowd. I am not browsing at the market. I do not have time to wait. I'm looking for specific things and want to see a sign that lists all the products and the prices."

Twenty respondents suggested market organizations provide more information about how to use Portland's farmers' markets. Ideas included educating shoppers about

what fruits and vegetables are in season, times and locations of all the area markets, tips on how to bargain shop, and common questions to ask growers.

A final criticism of farmers' markets was a lack of clear product promotions. Some respondents suggested farmers' markets would benefit from traditional cost-saving tools such as coupons, discount cards, or clearer value pricing such as 4 for \$1. Most respondents were not familiar with the value opportunities of shopping seasonally.

"There should be more information on the better values. What is in season? What needs to be sold soon? Things like over-ripe tomatoes for sauce? How are the growers pushing these items?"

"Don't try to get every last dollar from Oregon Trail (food stamp) clients. Offer deals. Let people know what the growers are trying to get rid of.

Subsidy via the USDA's Farmers' Market Nutrition Program was the second most common motivator for trying farmers' markets. While most participants did not know they could use food stamps at area markets, 19 participants had used WIC farmers' market coupons, an added benefit to the USDA's Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). WIC mothers are eligible to apply for coupons that can only be spent on fresh fruits, vegetables, and edible plant starts at approved farmers' markets and farm-direct produce stands. Most of these respondents credited WIC for making them aware of farmers' markets. But, when WIC coupons ran out, recipients did not remain regular market customers. Five respondents applied for the program and took the required class, but did not use their WIC coupons citing farmers' market inconvenience as a barrier. Note that in 2005, the WIC coupon allocation was \$20 per recipient for the season.

“I qualified (for WIC coupons) until my youngest turned two. My kids were too healthy to qualify beyond two. The experience of using them at markets was very good.”

In citing reasons for shopping markets, regular shoppers described the available produce as fresher, better tasting, and higher quality than grocery store offerings. They valued the interaction with the farmer who grew the products and the opportunity to support local businesses. Some also mentioned that the prices were better than their grocery stores’.

“I want to support the farmers and I want to keep my neighborhood market going. In three years I’ve only missed two market days and one was because I was delivering my sons.”

Occasional shoppers were likely to mention the fun atmosphere of Portland’s markets as the top reason for using them. This included comments about the social interaction with other shoppers, music, and activities for kids.

“The food is fresh. The people are nice. It is a good time.”

Note that none of the eight study participants who claimed to consume five or more portions of fruits and vegetables per day shopped farmers’ markets regularly. This group tended to budget more time for grocery shopping in order to bargain shop among multiple grocery sources. Some mentioned produce stands as the most economical source for a good variety of quality fruits and vegetables. These respondents did not prioritize locally-grown as a product attribute even in cases where they prioritized quality or fresh.

“I buy where the sales are, the grocery store or produce stand. I will go out of my way to buy produce at a stand because the quality is better.”

Summary of Findings

Low fresh produce consumption is the top barrier to serving food stamp clients at Portland's farmers' markets. In our sample, real income constraints appeared to compound the perception that produce is expensive. Our findings point to an opportunity to increase produce consumption and direct more dollars to small community farmers by expanding the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program's WIC coupon allocations. Findings also suggest that participants would respond to financial incentives that reward fruit and vegetable purchases such as retail discounts. A more comprehensive program is needed to increase produce consumption such as supplemental Food Stamp funds dedicated to the purchase of US-grown fruits and vegetables. Further research is needed to assess Food Stamp Program allocations versus the cost of a 5 A Day diet at a local level.

Beyond price barriers, market organizations and public health advocates alike must combat perceptions of produce, especially vegetables, as complicated and time-consuming to prepare. To reach more food stamp shoppers, market organizers need to promote quick and easy vegetable preparations and simple preservation techniques to prevent spoilage. Markets would also benefit from the promotion of fresh produce in other community forums such as schools and via local media.

Our study shows that increased produce consumption does not guarantee increased farmers market use due to views of markets as expensive and inconvenient. Based on contradictory views of market prices as both more expensive and cheaper than grocery stores, this study suggests a need for further research tracking the prices of comparable products at the range of grocery outlets in Portland. Criticisms of limited hours and days might best be addressed in the short-term by providing food stamp access

at all 28 Metro-Portland farmers' markets and promoting the overall network instead of individual markets.

ⁱ The Agricultural Marketing Services division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/FarmersMarketGrowth.htm. Accessed December 15, 2005.

ⁱⁱ The Food and Nutrition Services division of the U. S. Department of Agriculture, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/fssummar.htm>. Accessed February 17, 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ Oregon Department of Agriculture, www.oregon.gov/ODA/news/do_speech_051020.shtml. Accessed February 17, 2006.

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^v Oregon Food Bank, The State of Hunger, June 2004-June 2005 www.oregonfoodbank.org. Accessed February 15, 2006.

^{vi} Oregon Food Bank, The State of Hunger, June 2004-June 2005, www.oregonfoodbank.org. Accessed February 15, 2006.

^{vii} Oregon Department of Human Services food stamp case load comparison by branch, <http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/assistance/data/main.shtml>. Accessed January 10, 2006.

^{viii} Students of Portland State University's capstone course, "Asset Mapping with GIS," Spring 2005, A richer harvest toward a regional strategy for Portland area farmers' markets

^{ix} Oregon Department of Human Services food stamp case load comparison by branch, <http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/assistance/data/main.shtml>. Accessed January 10, 2006.

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^{xi} Oregon Food Bank, The State of Hunger, June 2004-June 2005, www.oregonfoodbank.org. Accessed February 15, 2006.

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