

Consumer response to product sampling at Kentucky farmers' markets

By Sara Williamson & Tim Woods

Motivation for research

Direct-to-consumer markets¹ are considered the driver of success for sales of local food, and estimated by the USDA to be at least twice as significant to the food system as total agricultural sales for all food products in the U.S.[1]. Kentucky is ranked among the top ten states for direct-to-consumer market growth, and farmers' markets account for an estimated \$10 million of the more than \$15 million in total annual direct-to-consumer sales by Kentucky producers² [1].

On a national scale³, farmers' markets have become the most widely accepted channel for direct-marketing food at a community level[2]. These venues are specifically unique because of the direct relationship between buyer and seller. Rather than establishing product perceptions via mass media branding, as with commercial products, it is the farmers' market itself and the farmer-consumer relationships that determine consumer desire and satisfaction[3].

In a 2009 survey of 302 farmers' market patrons at 11 Kentucky markets, consumers revealed that *product sampling* was a more desirable market amenity than was ease of parking, expanded market hours, debit card acceptance, or restroom accessibility[4-5]. With state legislation in place that provides the necessary provisions for home processing and product sampling at Kentucky markets, vendors have a unique opportunity to use sampling as a low-cost and high yield promotion tool. However, few market vendors are actually offering product

¹ "Direct to consumer market" is comprised of edible farm products sold, by farmer, directly to consumer for human consumption.

² The number of Kentucky market locations increased 44% from 2004 to 2009 (USDA).

³ Totaling 6,132 locations in 2010, the growth of US farmers' market locations represented an increase of 114% over market numbers reported in 2000. (USDA 2010)

samples. While consumer interest in local food has been extensively explored [5-34] and there is information to suggest that product sampling may positively impact sales and overall market growth[5, 35], the degree of economic impact associated with market shoppers' response to sampling remains unknown[5].

Objectives

The objective of this project is to determine if consumer insights or purchasing behavior of Kentucky farmers' market patrons actually change as a result of trying a product sample and/or receiving a recipe card for the sampled product.

Methodology

Specifically emphasizing apples and sweet potatoes, market patrons were offered a product sample and recipe card for the sampled product. Those who volunteered to complete a paper questionnaire at the market (immediately post-sampling) were asked to complete an additional "follow-up" survey (on the web) approximately three weeks after the event.

Another round of sampling events will take place during May 2011 with asparagus samples/recipes and again in mid-summer with corn and tomatoes. Additionally, a similar event and survey is being conducted at Good Foods Market to determine if consumer feedback will vary depending on market venue where sampling events occur.

This work is funded with a FSMIP grant that I authored (lead investigator is Tim Woods). Research is being conducted in partnership with Family and Consumer Sciences, who are interested in the impacts of the recipe card and have influenced the design of questionnaires. The survey instrument is available upon request.

Results

This poster will report preliminary data gathered during and after four sampling events conducted at four different Kentucky farmers' markets in October 2010. Of 180 survey participants at the farmers' market, 61 replied to the follow-up questionnaire. Results from those who completed both questionnaires, response to paper survey revealed that more than 50% of patrons surveyed considered themselves more likely to purchase apples and/or sweet potatoes as a result of trying the sample, and 60% reported that sampling contributed "a lot" to interest in trying the recipe at home. However, response to the "follow-up" survey a few weeks later revealed that 58% purchased apples on the sampling day and 52% purchased apples at the farmers' market since that day. However, only 17% reported purchasing sweet potatoes on the day of sampling, and 30% reported purchasing sweet potatoes at the farmers' market since the day of sampling.

The poster will incorporate results from contingency tables to communicate significant relationships found with cross-tabulation of consumer response. (considering relationships among those who purchased both products, those who replied to both surveys vs did not, demographics, and feedback to nutrition questions)

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