

6 WAYS TO IMPROVE REDEMPTION RATES OF FARMERS' MARKET VOUCHERS



Redemption rate is the most influential factor concerning the overall benefits of vouchers for Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs (FMNPs). If recipients do not use their coupons, they receive no benefit and participating farmers see no increase in sales.

Improving redemption rates may also be an important factor to ensure continued funding. Programs that appear underutilized will not receive the funding they need to help the families and farmers who rely on the program.

In the U.S. redemption rates vary by market, some as low as 45% and some as high as 98%.¹ Throughout the years and across the country, there appears to be no consistency when it comes to voucher redemption.

Some studies have implemented several different strategies to improve redemption rate, such as, reducing barriers, providing nutrition education, collaborating with local agencies, and making markets more attractive to consumers, which resulted in significant redemption rate increases.

This document provides suggestions that may help improve redemption rates at markets and thus increase the benefits of FMNPs to participants and farmers.

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1

REDUCE BARRIERS

Receiving money towards fruits and vegetables is good incentive for recipients to attend a farmers' market and bring home fresh produce; however, there are several barriers that often keep participants from redeeming their coupons. Market location is one of those barriers. If the market is relatively far away from a participant's residence, it may be difficult to find the time and means of transportation to get there. This is especially true if participants rely on public transportation, which is yet another barrier. The times in which the market operates can also be a barrier. If the times do not compliment work schedules or bus schedules, it may be difficult for participants to attend.

Those with convenient modes of transportation (do not rely on public transportation) are twice as likely to return to a farmers' market.²

Relocating a market is not an unreasonable solution to improve redemption rates. Markets which have relocated to more convenient locations and adjusted market hours for FMNP recipients witnessed improved redemption rates. Communities can also work with their transit systems in order to provide direct routes from low-income neighborhoods to market locations. Setting up shuttle buses from a central location to the market is also a way to address these barriers and make attending a market more convenient for consumers.

Some Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs (SFMNP) have experimented with home delivery of market produce as a way to address logistical barriers, as well as the barrier of poor health. It was found that fruit and vegetable consumption was increased by 1.04 servings for those participating in the program.³

Other types of barriers that exist can be associated with shame. Disguising coupons is one way to alleviate embarrassment for some recipients, and thus improve redemption rate of vouchers. The Grimsby Farmer's Market in Ontario, randomly hands out free coupons to market consumers on the day of the market to conceal the identity of low-income voucher recipients.⁴

Working to reduce or eliminate common barriers can improve redemption rates and help voucher recipients receive the benefits intended by the program.

2

PROVIDE MORE COUPONS AT ONE TIME

Receiving \$10 worth of coupons at one time may not be enough incentive for recipients to make a trip to market. Receiving more coupons at once would make a trip to the market more worthwhile (though coupons should still remain in small increments since some programs do not permit vendors to make change).

Having participants attend a class about storage, cooking, canning, or freezing of produce, would help ensure this option would not result extra produce going to waste.

For markets that allow purchases of dairy products and meat, which are significantly more expensive than fruits and vegetables, receiving more coupons at one time would aid in the purchase of these products. It would also create motivation to overcome any existing barriers to redeem coupons at markets that don't have restrictions on what can be purchased.

Grassroots initiatives can also help create an incentive to redeem vouchers. Programs such as Kentucky Double Dollars, Double Value Coupon Program, and Matching Dollars are farmers' market initiatives that offer to match between \$5 and \$20 on FMNP purchases, providing twice as many coupons and twice the incentive to redeem FMNP vouchers.



3

PROVIDE EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

Some FMNP voucher recipients may not redeem their coupons because they don't recognize the value of fresh produce or its affect on health. Fruits and vegetable are often viewed as being more expensive than other foods, and produce at farmers' markets are thought to be more expensive than grocery stores.

Educational interventions have proved to change participants' attitudes and behaviors towards fruits and vegetables, helping them see the benefits of fresh produce. It also helps consumers become more familiar with actual quality and pricing of fruits and vegetables at markets.

Nevertheless, it is also important to provide information that participants are interested in knowing and in ways that motivate participants to redeem their coupons. Having an option between hands-on cooking classes, participating in community gardens, or attending a cooking demonstration is important to the mind-set of coupon recipients.

After attending a 45 min cooking demonstration, focused on simple, healthy recipes, 100% of 50 survey respondents said they would try to prepare the same meal at home. ⁵

Holding education sessions at the market, having vendors provide information about their crops and farming, and offering classes as part of a shuttle service to the market are all ways to introduce educational materials.

It is also important to address the delivery of the educational interventions. Teachers, instructors, trainers, and even those simply handing out educational information should "buy in" to the program and show enthusiasm about sharing nutritional information. If those delivering the educational information show interest in the subject, they can encourage participants' own appreciation for the information. This results in participants improving their nutritional knowledge and the desire to improve health through fruit and vegetable consumption. In the end, this creates motivation to attend a market and redeem vouchers.

To influence teacher enthusiasm, training is suggested. Training can increase teacher knowledge about the FMNP and increase motivation to use the educational resources made available to share with FMNP participants. An excellent way to provide adequate training is through the collaboration of local organizations that are in support of FMNPs. The sharing of information, resources, and best practices can produce the most efficient and desirable outcomes. Collaborating with local agencies is also another way to increase redemption rates.



4

COLLABORATE WITH LOCAL AGENCIES

The benefits of collaborating with local organizations are many. Partnering with community and rural development groups, health organizations, agriculture departments, public transit, schools, churches, and other local agencies provides opportunities that would not exist or be limited for a single FMNP agency or farmers' market.

Partnerships can provide opportunities for co-promotion, shared responsibilities, training for vendors, educators, and administration, dispersal of information, leveraging for financial support, and even the overall improvement of health for the community.

A farmers' market in Camden, New Jersey, arranged to have health screening checks done at the market each week. The market soon became a place for patrons to access fresh produce and look after their health and the health of their families. The blood pressure and diabetes screening became so popular that neighboring health organizations were added to waiting lists to share their health education, information, and screenings at four other nearby markets.⁶

When a group in Frontenac County, Ontario, realized redemption for their fruit and vegetable program was low because participants had difficulty preparing produce for meals with their current utensils, they partnered with Pampered Chef to obtain sharp knives for participants.



5

HIRE A FMNP MANAGER

In order to improve FMNPs redemption rates, it's beneficial to have a designated person to identify opportunities for improvements and lead the efforts. Any market, office, or government agency, at any level of involvement in the program (FMNP offices, Cooperative Extension offices, health agencies, agriculture agencies, farmers' market associations, or individual markets) can decide to hire a manager in order to increase the benefits of FMNP vouchers to low-income families and farmers through improved redemption rates.

Having a designated manager is also a good way to pursue relationships with local organizations, coordinate efforts between agencies, ensure the goals and messages are unified, and track the results of strategies implemented to improve coupon redemption.

Many farmers' markets have invested in a market manager to instigate efforts to improve market appeal to the community, increase sales, and add more patrons, which includes finding ways to boost FMNP voucher redemption to help achieve these goals. Having a paid manager substantially increased the income of market vendors, despite initial skepticism, and resulted in greater economic success for a number of markets.

Statewide managers have also been hired by Cooperative Extension offices to initiate and coordinate redemption rate improvement efforts, including the development of nutrition education resources, interagency collaboration, and administration of the distribution of resources. New York State's manager was an integral part of a project that successfully increased FMNP voucher redemption, participant fruit and vegetable intake, and market sales.⁷

At Ashe County Farmers Market in North Carolina vendors and community officials were initially resistant to hiring a manager. By the end of the season, vendors voted to give the manager a bonus to reflect their support and the additional income they received due to her organizational and marketing efforts.⁶

6

CREATE REPEAT CUSTOMERS

It is smart business to focus marketing efforts on repeat customers rather than spend the time, energy, and money it takes to attract new customers. Potential customers will also only be interested in marketing efforts if they have already decided to make a change to their normal routines and purchases.

FMNP voucher recipients are the perfect repeat customers because the coupons are of no cost to them. They essentially receive “free money” to use on fresh produce at farmers’ markets, and in most cases are provided with coupons more than once per season.

“Why spend so much money on mass advertising, when you can dedicate your resources to people you know will patronize the market?”⁶

FMNP participants who return to a farmer’s market show an increase in fruit and vegetable consumption, so turning FMNP voucher recipients into repeat customers is truly beneficial to the program.

However, if recipients don’t redeem their coupon, neither the recipient nor the farmer, benefits. Fortunately, there are several ways to entice FMNP coupon recipients to attend a farmers’ market and to keep them coming back.

Make markets more appealing

Turning a farmers’ market into a community gathering place is a great way to attract and maintain a core customer base. Adding cultural festivals and tours can increase the market’s visibility and transform it into a community center instead of just a place to buy locally farmed foods.

Markets focused on attracting more customers often work to socially diversify their space. They purposely seek to celebrate the different demographics of the community through music, shopping, food, and entertainment. Market organizers also try to

increase the variety of products sold at market to reflect what patrons want. Cooking demonstrations have also been used to share cultural-specific recipes.

The Toledo, Ohio, farmers' market incorporated these changes, as well as making a few structural changes like a shaded seating area, to create a repeat customer base. The result was increased market sales of \$100,000, the addition of six market days, four new vendors, and an increase of \$1000 in FMNP sales.⁶

Advertise FMNP at markets and participating vendor stalls

It makes sense that voucher recipients would be provided with information about which markets accept coupons, but there is much more information that participants want to know. Having simple, easy access to more information helps make the market experience enjoyable and leads to the potential of repeat customers.

FMNP participants have shown interest in receiving information about what each vendor is selling, their prices, which vendors accept coupons, and where the vendors are located at the markets. Some participants find it hard to determine what they can purchase due to coupon restrictions and where to locate vendors selling the products they want, especially when participating vendors are placed randomly throughout the markets.

Placing participating vendors close together and having program information available at the markets will help eliminate frustration and confusion. Markets can also work to get more vendors to participate in FMNPs and hire staff members to set up a stall at the market to answer questions and provide information about FMNP voucher programs. One market that infused these efforts had nearly a 100% redemption rate for SFMNP vouchers.

Information concerning FMNP vouchers can also be advertised and promoted at food pantries, libraries, rural post offices, and child and family services to encourage voucher recipients to redeem their coupons.

Provide coupons more often

If barriers like location and transportation have been eliminated or reduced, offering FMNP vouchers several times a season could be an impactful way of creating repeat customers. If \$21 worth of coupons is offered once per season (\$21 was the average amount of FMNP coupons offered in the U.S. 2012 season⁸), a participant may not find the trip to market worthwhile or find any existing barriers too inconvenient to redeem the coupons.

Receiving coupons on several different occasions will give recipients the opportunity to visit the market and become familiar with the experience. If participants enjoy the market experience and learn about the benefits of fruits and vegetables, they are likely to redeem future vouchers. This may result in coupon recipients returning to the market to use their own money to purchase fresh produce.

Several studies have found that many of their FMNP participants have spent their own money or food stamps at markets in addition to their vouchers. Having FMNP recipients become repeat customers can improve fruit and vegetable intake for participants and create additional revenue for farmers and the community in general.

Many markets across the U.S. have been successful at improving redemption rates and should be used as models for markets or agencies trying to improve their nutrition programs and redemption rates. Improving redemption rates of farmers' market vouchers is a good way to ensure the intended benefits of FMNPs are reaching low-income families and farmers. Achieving high redemption rates also proves the effectiveness of the program and can help to secure future program funding.



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