

## **A Look at Data Collection in Wisconsin Markets**

By Alfonso Morales, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Urban and Regional Planning, University of Madison-Wisconsin and Principal Investigator, *Indicators for Impact: Farmers Markets as Leaders in Collaborative Food System Data Collection and Analysis*

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As the spring season begins to open in some parts of the northern hemisphere we should remember how important it is for marketplaces to know themselves. In order to do so, they must collect data about their activities.

Errin Welty is the Downtown Development Account Manager for the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, and in this capacity she supports Wisconsin Main Street organizations and farmers markets by providing outreach and technical assistance for business owners, property owners and developers operating in one of more than 80 designated downtown revitalization programs across the state. I talked with Errin about her participation in an ongoing research study to identify and facilitate data collection at farmers markets.

*Errin says, "In my work with Wisconsin Main Street communities, we are continually striving to help our communities establish effective ways of measuring and communicating the impact of our efforts on the local community. Since so many of our communities coordinate or host downtown farmers markets, and because these events attract visitors that represent a key demographic group for downtown merchants, I was excited about the opportunity to more formally understand and evaluate market performance, and I approached the University of Wisconsin to volunteer our markets as additional subjects of the study. Ultimately, five of our communities agreed to dedicate the time and effort required to fully participate in the study during the 2015 season. These communities represented a variety of characteristics and included urban and rural communities as well as locally and regionally focused markets."*

Errin knows how important it is for data collection tools to be reliable and valid, as well as easy to use. She told us, *"The structure of the survey tool makes it easy for communities to plan, recruit volunteers and conduct market measurements according to scientific standards. The national scope of the projects allows markets to evaluate not only internal market dynamics and compare their market with other Wisconsin-based markets, but to better understand best management practices and strategies to maximize the benefit of the market for targeted populations, whether that goal is to accommodate pedestrians and cyclists, expand the regional market, attract a greater percentage of food share dollars or other local goals."*

Data collection helps market managers understand their markets. In describing her work with Main Street Program markets in Wisconsin, Errin elaborated, *"In addition to the obvious benefits which came through analysis of study results, the process of participating in the study itself helped the downtown organizations and market managers involved make strides toward better understanding their respective markets. Even before results were available, the regular interactions with vendors and visitors allowed managers to better understand traffic flows, characteristics of successful vendors, impact of weather and external conflicts on market attendance and spending."*

What terrific insight about how people make decisions, create new habits and gain new perspectives.

When asked about findings from 2015's data collection, Errin replied. *“Reviewing the Main Street markets has provided a number of valuable insights for participating communities. The information gained from the study has already been helpful as communities look to the 2016 market season and evaluate strategies to improve marketing and management, creating a better experience for both vendors and visitors.”*

Based on the positive experiences of markets with the 2015 study process, many anticipate continuing to collect data in 2016, and we are hoping to expand the pool to include additional communities and/or weekday markets as well. Understanding the types of results that are possible through systematic survey instruments has increased interest by communities in better evaluating a variety of locally produced events, further increasing the effectiveness of organizations at communicating the value of downtown engagement to key audiences. We look forward to another year of robust data collection and learning as farmers markets open across Wisconsin.