

Focusing on SNAP: Farmers Markets and Focus Group Outreach

February, 2017

With funding from the USDA Food and Nutrition Service's Farmers Market SNAP Support Grants (FMSSG), five market organizations employed focus groups to refine their SNAP marketing strategy and uncover any remaining barriers SNAP shoppers in redeeming their benefits at farmers markets.

Focus group research involves organized discussion with a selected group of individuals to gain information about their views and experiences on a particular topic. The benefits of focus group research include gaining insights into people's shared understandings of everyday life and the ways in which individuals are influenced by others in a group situation.¹



General Data

All of the grantees reported that they will use focus groups in the future for gathering feedback on their marketing/outreach activities. Some of the grantees had difficulty in meeting their internal quota for attendance, even when the hours were adjusted to evening and free child care was offered. All of the organizations used flyers, direct emails and partner organizations contacts to find the attendees for their focus groups.

[The Food Trust](#), [Boulder County Public Health](#) and [The Friends of Rochester Public Market](#) have made materials available from their focus group work which can be found in the Farmers Market Coalition Resource Library by following the

links above, searching the Surveys, Evaluation, and Research category in the Library or by contacting the organizations directly.

- The number of participants among all of the organizations' focus groups ranged from 6-10 participants
- Both current and potential shoppers were included.
- Almost all groups offered participants compensation in the range of \$10-\$50 for their time.¹
- Public transportation tokens were another form of reward offered to participants.
- All of the market organizations received valuable input during the focus groups that altered their marketing or outreach activities.

Some findings that would be difficult to implement with the scope of the project:

- Limited hours of farmers markets.
- No transportation to get to markets.
- Not knowing how to cook the foods.
- Kids on the autism spectrum; parents find markets too stimulating to bring their kids there.
- Lack of good quality cooking equipment.

Boulder County Public Health

Boulder County Public Health will use funds to staff a farmers market SNAP coordinator, conduct focus groups on the barriers to accessing farmers markets, develop and implement an outreach plan, train farmers and market managers on managing a SNAP program, hire bi-lingual staff for markets, and create communication tools to distribute best practices to farmers markets in the county.

Logistics

The focus groups were held in three communities, where two existing markets are located and where a third market is slated to open. Since increasing Latino participation is a goal of the project, the focus group recruitment focused on the Latino community but found it difficult to get enough representation. Six focus groups were planned in total, three in English and three in Spanish.

¹ Many of these rewards were in the form of market gifts such as tote bags or market tokens. GrowNYC offered a generic \$25 gift VISA card and The Food Trust distributed Visa and AmEx gift cards.

Key Findings

- / Two participants didn't know what a farmers market was.
- / Participants didn't want a SNAP specific tent; they felt it had a stigma attached to it.
- / Participants really liked the existing tri-fold brochure and loved the seasonality calendar. The group also tested some of the Fair Food Network materials; participants liked the color scheme but thought it was too busy.
- / Participants felt the market was a fun activity for families.
- / Market sometimes "too much of a scene"; needs a quiet area to get away from the crowd, more activities for kids. A shaded area with misters was one suggestion.

Follow up

- / Next season, the SNAP tent will be integrated with the information tent. The Boulder County Farmers Market is looking into purchasing EBT machines that can also read credit and debit cards. If this equipment is purchased, SNAP customers will not stand in a separate line to get their SNAP bucks.
- / The direct mailing was designed based on feedback received from focus group participants. People said they would be more likely to read mail from the county that had an "official look to it." The direct mailing was sent in county envelopes, with a letter from HHS and the Health Department.
- / Another focus group in Boulder was held last month with the new Latina staff person recruiting people to come to this meeting. The meeting was held at night, in the public library and offered free child care; however only two people signed up for this focus group. Because of small turnout, the Latino focus groups were run more as informational interviews since they had between 1-2 participants.

City of Independence

The City of Independence will use FMSSG funds to design and implement a marketing plan for the Independence Farmers market through movie, billboard, local print and bus advertisements, additionally banners and other printed advertising material will be used at the farmers market and distributed throughout the community. City staff will also perform outreach and educational events in order to increase redemptions at the farmers market due to higher community awareness of SNAP at the farmers market.

Logistics

Target population for focus groups were those SNAP clients already attending

meeting already scheduled in the community. Two of the groups were held during community budgeting classes and another was held at a low-income housing residents meeting.

Key Findings

- / Most of the attendees didn't know that the market accepted SNAP.
- / Showed them different draft materials to refine which address of the market and which acronym-SNAP or EBT-worked best.

Follow up

The focus groups input resulted in the current outreach materials. All three identifiers-SNAP/foodstamps/EBT- have been used on all materials based on the input given. The newspaper insert that resembles a coupon has been the greatest success.



**Rochester Market's
Token Center advertises
SNAP availability**

Friends of Rochester Public Market

Through the Greater Rochester Farmers' Market SNAP Collaborative project the Friends of the Rochester Public Market will implement a community-wide marketing campaign that increases awareness of SNAP use at regional farmers markets. Additionally funds will be used to develop a new SNAP Token Center at the Public Market and staff salaries for SNAP related activities.

Logistics

Grantee held one hour-long focus group with participants recruited by market staff. All participants were consistent SNAP users at one or more of the markets. A semi-structured interview guide was used to better understand what people like about using their SNAP benefits at the market and to identify strategies for an effective campaign to increase SNAP use at the markets.

Key Findings

- / Participants were unanimous in their praise for SNAP benefits at the market. About half wrote that there was little that could be done to
- / get them to spend more. "No reason, I spend what I can." It would be beneficial to talk to individuals who don't use their SNAP benefits at the markets to confirm or improve the messages this group suggested.

More feedback

Messaging

Fresh foods - "Fresh produce. First coming out of the garden, you can't beat that."

Affordability - "Can't beat the prices." "More for your money." "You get more than at the supermarket."

Health benefits - "I can get the things that can keep my blood sugar under control. Cause I got free stuff off my SNAP card."

Supporting local farmers - "Vendors are nice." "Like supporting local farmers."

Increase awareness of Fresh Connect — "Tell 'em about Connects!" "More bang for your buck."

Fun for all — "My kids love the market. They like picking out their fruits and vegetables. It is a good experience for them too."

Barriers

Availability of markets — "If they could extend the hours that would be great."

SNAP benefit logistics — "Wish tokens were interchangeable."

Some suggested a shuttle to make it easier or to work with Regional Transit Service (RTS) to allow produce carts during certain hours or on certain buses.

From the Friends of Rochester Public Market report SNAP at the Market. Collaborative Health Research. 2016 Available in the FMC Resource Library.

Follow up

The input from the focus group participants informed the design and implementation of a community wide marketing campaign that promoted use of SNAP at area farmers markets. SNAP participants consistently reported that "fresh & healthy" and "affordable" were what drew them regularly to the markets. Two marketing campaigns: "Fresh for Less" and "FarmersMarketsROC - Eat Local, It's a SNAP" used this information in the content and design of the campaigns as well as the placement of ads in various venues.



East Village mural – one of the murals created by street artists TATS Cru, 4 blocks from one of the Greenmarket locations.

Grow NYC

Project Thumbnail: GrowNYC will create a branding and advertising campaign that promotes SNAP acceptance at Greenmarkets throughout the city and purchase marketing materials, such as banners, flyers, canopies, etc., based on the campaign.

Logistics

The only one of the five grantees that didn't directly manage the focus groups, instead recruiting a pro-bono marketing firm (Edelman). The market staff recruited the market customers; the other half was SNAP users who didn't shop at the market and were chosen by the firm.

Key Findings

The focus group was presented with two campaign directions and asked to comment a farm-to-table message with beautiful photos of ingredients and finished dishes, and the street-art based message ("Oh SNAP!") that featured artists drawings of fruits and vegetables. Street art-themed education campaign that included outreach through bus, subway, and newspaper placements as well as permanent murals alerting passersby to existence of market at location was

What Is A Persona?

A persona is depicted as a specific person but is not a real individual; rather, it is synthesized from observations of many people. Each persona represents a significant portion of people in the real world and enables the designer to focus on a manageable and memorable cast of characters, instead of focusing on thousands of individuals.

tested during interviews. The draft artwork for the campaign and its tagline were received very favorably: The participants reported that the street art-themed campaign made them feel it wasn't embarrassing to shop with SNAP, and was even empowering.

Three shopper persona profiles of SNAP recipients were created by Grow NYC's pro bono research firm, Edelman:

- / **Nostalgics:** know markets from past experience, might be first generation living in the US, naturally drawn to purchasing fresh food outdoors. Values diverse products not available at supermarkets and an interactive, communal shopping experience.
- / **Chief Food Officer / CFO:** women who are older, who don't have kids at home anymore, receiving other benefits, and have more time to prep the food; does not waste food and loves a good value.
- / **Fridge refreshers:** 25-35, with 2+ children, often new/first generation American. Mostly shopping in bulk but buying produce more often. Trying to keep up with the demand. Relies on supermarkets for most items, but doesn't trust them for fruits and vegetables.

Follow Up

GrowNYC ultimately moved forward with the Oh SNAP! campaign. Key comments from the focus group shaped this selection, and also impacted the campaign's direction and implementation. Most importantly, group members said that it was an empowering message and they reacted very positively to GrowNYC working with street artists/the community. GrowNYC delivered the "empowerment" angle to the artists to ensure that came through in the artwork. In selecting street artists and moving forward with mural creation, GrowNYC was very careful to vet the artists, ensuring they had community support and buy-in, and that their reputations would reflect positively on the campaign itself

The Food Trust

Project Thumbnail: The Food Trust will conduct focus groups, staff EBT operation at markets, implement promotional events around SNAP, develop marketing plan to educate SNAP-clients on EBT at farmers markets, develop multi-lingual marketing and educational materials, train market managers on SNAP program management, and collaborate with local partners.

Logistics

Two groups of participants: market shoppers and non-farmers market shoppers. Since The Food Trust surveys market customers does customer surveys each season and asks for contact information (optional), market participants were pulled from that database. Flyers were distributed at Reading Terminal Market, and also nutrition educators doing adult education gave sign-up information about focus groups to nutrition educators doing adult education to participants to find more people who did not already shop at area farmers markets.



Updated 2016 bus shelter ad from The Food Trust with “Free” as the key word

Key Findings

- / Showed 2015 marketing materials, and draft of 2016 materials, and received detailed feedback.
- / Knowledge, perceptions of exclusivity and produce being expensive, and other reasons were stated as barriers to shopping at the farmers market.
- / The quality of produce, social aspect of the market, and meeting the growers/farmers were significant themes that emerged among farmers market shoppers but not among non-market shoppers.
- / Themes of price sensitivity and various shopping strategies to mitigate expensive prices were common for both types of shoppers.
- / Communication strategies, such as mode of communication/information exchange and location, were discussed.
- / Feedback on venues and partners for advertising underscore the potential of advertising on public transit (i.e., SEPTA) buses and trains.
- / Market advertising and outreach addressing these barriers and common themes can lower stigma, improve perceptions and knowledge about the market and produce, as well as drive customer traffic and SNAP sales.

Follow up

TFT changed the overall style of their materials from 2015 to 2016 based on informant interviews. The materials became much more visual, and of the language used in the brochure was altered. In previous years' materials, phrases such as "Save on Fruits and Vegetables at your Farmers Market" were used on the public transportation advertisements; based on feedback, this year the word "free," was used for the first time. The headline for the public transportation campaign became "Earn FREE fruits and vegetables at your local farmers market!"

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ⁱ *Gibbs, A. (1997). Focus groups. Social research update, 19(8), 1-8.*