

NC GROWING TOGETHER

Connecting Local Foods
to Mainstream Markets



HOSTING LOCAL FOOD EVENTS WITH GROCERY STORES & RETAILERS

a guide for community groups and
nonprofits working with local and
regional retailers

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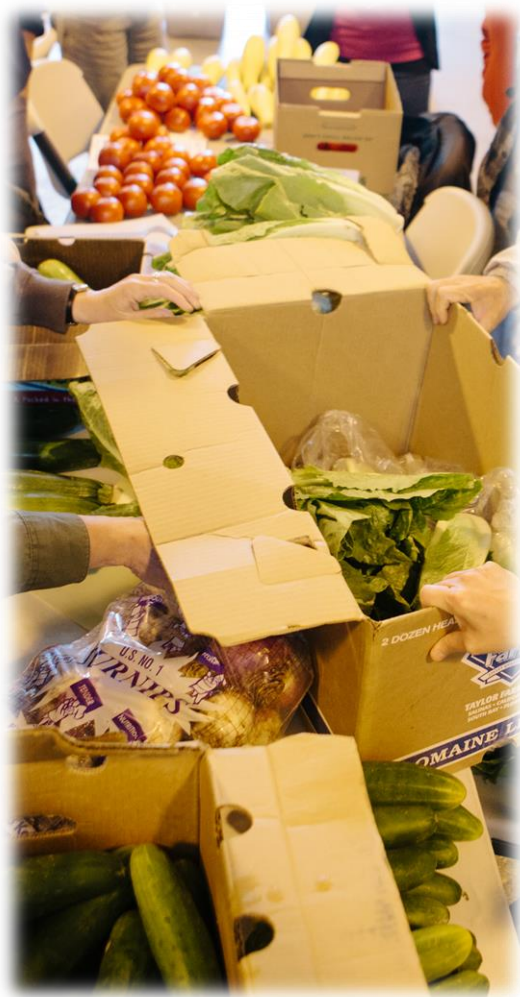


United States
Department of
Agriculture

National Institute
of Food and
Agriculture

This material is based upon work that is supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, United States Department of Agriculture, under award no. 2013-68004-20363. Any opinions, findings, recommendations, or conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. March 2017

Purpose



This guide is designed to assist community food advocates and retailers in designing, hosting, and evaluating successful “Meet the Farmer” or “Local Food” events in traditional grocery retail settings.

Recent research suggests that supporting locally grown products is increasingly important to consumers, but that convenience ultimately guides most consumption processes.

Research also suggests that “*grocery stores where people already shop*” is the location where most people buy local food, which reinforces the importance of grocery stores to community advocates and community members alike. This core value of convenience coupled with a desire for local products points to a key opportunity for grocery stores to fill a much-demanded niche in the intersection of local products and convenience.

Community advocates have a unique opportunity to assist grocery stores in promoting, purchasing, and selling local products as an effective way to both increase consumption of local foods and to support local foods purchasing in traditional markets.

Buy Local Trends & Data Points

- Research indicates that desire to support local business is one of the key drivers in choosing a grocery store for most consumers (Tsoodle et al., 2011).
- Market trends indicate that consumers increasingly demand to know where their food comes from and how it is produced. This trend transcends gender, education level, geographic location, and income level. However, despite a desire to buy locally grown products, convenience remains a key determinant of where people buy their groceries.
- The Mintel firm conducted a survey to better understand American consumers' interest in buying local products. The conclusion of that research is that although Americans are "drawn to the selflessness of living local" their decision whether or not to purchase local items ultimately comes down to convenience. "Consumers want to purchase local products – namely the local produce that they tend to most associate with their own health – but they don't want to go out of their way to get them" (Grabowski, 2013).
- Consumers are demanding locally grown and produced goods for a variety of reasons:
 - Research indicates that "private factors," which include freshness, quality, health benefits and food safety, are the primary factors motivating people's local food purchases (Grabowski 2013, Bond et al 2008, Nurse & Thilmany 2010, Ostrom 2006, and Schneider & Francis 2005).
 - However, "public factors" are of primary significance to a smaller group of local food shoppers and of secondary (but still significant) importance to the group most concerned with private factors. "Public factors" include "giving back to the community," "keeping dollars in the community," "supporting small farmers," "farmers receiving fair returns," and various other social and environmental issues (Bond et al 2008, Nurse & Thilmany 2010, Ostrom 2006, Schneider & Francis 2005).



Benefits for Retailers

It is no surprise that the degree to which a grocery store is engaged with the local community has been shown to increase loyalty to the store and shoppers' perception of the higher value of the goods, which leads to increased patronage and a willingness to pay a premium for goods (Landry et al., 2005).

Community engagement, or the extent to which a store has connections to and interacts with the community, is important for creating trust between people and supermarkets in locations where people have previously mistrusted chain stores or corporations.

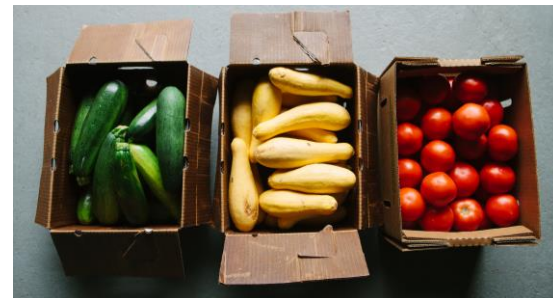
Creating community engagement is a function of knowing the community well, bringing the community together, and creating a reciprocal relationship with the community. For example, when stores show customers how buying local products from their store affects the local economy and community, or when they provide a place of congregation for community members such as by offering cooking classes, a sense of community is created.

Meet the Farmer events provide the grocery chain a chance to create a sense of community and are therefore important to their strategy of improving their position as a family- and community-based grocery store.

Customers have the opportunity to meet the people who grow their food or produce their favorite sauce or spread, enforcing the idea that the stores consistently offer products that support the local economy and community.

Additionally, some studies have shown that when customers are able to taste local products before they purchase them they are more likely to have a positive attitude towards them and pay a higher price for them (Avitia et al., 2012).

- NCGT Assessment for Hosting Successful Meet the Farmer Events (2015)



Approaching A Grocery Retailer



“Most grocery store managers are consistently enthusiastic about and capable of organizing successful in store events if given sufficient staff time and support.”

- NCGT Assessment for Hosting Successful Meet the Farmer Events (2015)

- **Grocery store managers are busy people.** Make sure to approach your local retailer several weeks in advance of your planned date to ensure plenty of communication time.
- **Make a compelling case for how your event will help the store’s bottom line.** Use some of the data points provided in this document to assist you in drafting a letter or email.
- **Emphasize that your community group is on board to do most of the heavy lifting.** Let the manager know that they won’t be committing a lot of staff time or resources to the event, and that your group has the capacity to put this on professionally – especially by helping with marketing.
- **Start with a phone message, but follow up with an email or a hand-delivered letter to the store.** Give the manager all the information they need up front, and then be persistent but polite in following up with them.

Planning Considerations

Farmers vs. value-added producers: Which local businesses are carried in the local store? Do you want to focus on farm products or value-added products? ***It's important that the local vendors you choose to work with are already sold in the store – keep in mind that vendors need a financial incentive to be there, too.**

Point of contact for the vendor(s): If you have the capacity to do so, offer to the store manager that you can manage contacting, confirming, and working with the vendors. Often this is difficult for the store manager to take on.

Signage in the store: Often, managers are reliant on their corporate advertising department to send out email blasts and arrange in-store signage. Sometimes, this can create problems in delivering the signage on time and to the specifications that the store manager needs. If you have the capacity to do so, offer to design signage that the manager can approve and you can have printed locally.

Other advertising and marketing: Consider whether you will use in-store promotion, social and online media, radio and newspaper ads, and other types of advertising. If there are costs associated with these, see if your agency can assume some of those, or if there is a partner agency that would be willing to assist.

Communication with customers (vendor training): Select vendors who are comfortable dealing with the public one-on-one (such as those who have been successful in a market setting) or build in some time to work with a farmer or food maker who needs assistance in learning customer service skills, how to engage with customers in-store, and how to self-promote their brand and business through printed materials and conversation.

Tables, chairs, display stands, and other necessary items: Do you have these items, or does the farmer or food maker you are working with? Are you asking the store to provide tables (not always a possibility)? Make sure you know that you can provide a visually engaging display before approaching the retailer.

Best time of day for foot traffic: The manager can help you select the day and time during which you're likely to get most foot traffic while not interfering with regular store operations. If your event is held during good weather, consider setting up outside the entrance doors where your visibility will be increased.

Planning Timeline



Two Months Ahead:

- Send initial email and make phone calls to the store manager. Provide an estimated week or month in which you'd like to host the event, and ask for what works best with their schedules before confirming a date and time.
- Reach out to the vendor – a farmer or local food maker – that you want to showcase. If space permits, select two or three vendors whose products are carried at the store.
- Communicate with your organization about your plans and identify any partners – a local food council, Cooperative Extension office, or health and wellness group, for example – who may want to be involved.

One Month Ahead:

- Confirm the time and date for the event.
- Confirm the store location. Do a walk-through with the store manager so you will have a good idea of how many tables and vendors you'll be able to host.
- Create table signage and prepare a marketing display.
- Email a "Save the Date" flyer to your partners, the store manager, and your own outreach list; promote through social media.
- Order any paid public outreach, such as radio or newspaper ads, to begin two weeks prior to the event.
- Print & distribute postcards or flyers that can be used at the store, and find other locations, such as hospitals, Extension offices, or farmers' markets, where the flyers can be posted.

Planning Timeline



Two Weeks Ahead:

- Make sure any paid ads are set to run.
- Confirm all details of the schedule with the vendors and any participating partners.
- Email the store manager with a report on your progress, drafts of all signage and printed materials, and the details of the schedule. Make sure they clear the signage before you print anything!
- Make sure the vendors are bringing an appropriate amount of product to share, and products that will create visually engaging displays.
- Re-send electronic flyer to your marketing sources.

One Week Ahead:

- Print all signage and materials, including surveys.
- Make sure vendors have business cards, brochures or other printed material to hand out.
- Purchase tablecloth, toothpicks, and napkins, if necessary, along with clipboards, pens, bottled water, and any other supplies you may need.
- Touch base with the store manager to verify all details.

Sample Event Schedule

- 1 hour prior** Arrive at store and begin setup
- 15 minutes prior** Verify all items are set for display
- Event time** Between 1-3 hrs; in-store discussion with customers and store staff
- Event Breakdown** Begin at end of event; try to remove all materials from the store no later than 30 minutes after the end of the event.



Event Setup



Make it beautiful!

- **Set up a table** with a tablecloth, signage, and the best wares you can offer. Choose fresh produce or well-packaged items that showcase the strengths and unique offerings of the farmer or food producer.
- **Signage** should clearly indicate the logo, website, and name of the farm or food company. Smaller signs should:
 - describe the product;
 - indicate any allergen concerns in each product;
 - point out specific product characteristics (such as heirloom varieties, naturally or organically grown, locally produced, etc.); and
 - let people know where they can buy each product.
- **Give out free samples** – this is an important way to get customers to stop and talk with you! Use toothpicks and offer napkins so there are no food safety issues. If using cold-store products, make sure to bring coolers and plenty of ice.
- **Make bright, colorful nametags** for your organization's members, the store manager and any store staff, and the farmer or food maker who is presenting.
- Bring along some coffee or bottled water for those who will be talking to customers during the event.

Bring a clipboard or two for surveys and note-taking during your conversations with customers. Before the event, work with your farmer or food maker to help them get business cards, make flyers or postcards, or design other marketing materials!

Supplies and Costs

Estimated Cost	Recommended Supply Items
\$10.00	Toothpicks, napkins, and tablecloths
\$10.00	Clipboards, pens, pencils, etc.
\$50.00	<p>Cost for Vendor Products</p> <p>This is a variable cost that will change depending on how many vendors are attending, how long the event will last, and how many people are attending. Remind the vendor that although they are giving away product, they are receiving direct contact with potential consumers at one of their larger retail outlets – which typically can't be purchased through traditional advertising.</p>
\$5.00	Ice, if cooler needed for cold-storage items
\$30.00-50.00	<p>Printing</p> <p>This includes larger signage, such as a foamboard or poster display or a banner, as well as table signage, printed surveys, and any other regular printing needed. <i>*You can also design this banner or foamboard in such a way that it can be used more than once – at farmers' markets or other events – as a way to make this purchase more useful long-term.</i></p>
\$5.00 per vendor	<p>Bottled Water, Coffee, or Snacks</p> <p>This is not essential, but is a kind way to tell your local food provider that you value their time and appreciate their assistance.</p>

Suggested Language for Promotional Materials

Save The Date / Event Announcement

Date + Time

Location

Featured vendors or farmers

Hosts & Sponsors

Love Local?

Come learn about [your local farmer or food producer] and other local foods carried right in your neighborhood grocery store!

Join us for delicious samples, meet the [farmer/producer] who makes your food, and learn about other local products carried at your local [store name].

Stop by while you're on your weekly grocery run [include date again here]. If you have any questions, feel free to reach us at [contact email and phone].

Include event partners/sponsors names/logos, including any buyers who may be attending if they are to be counted as sponsors or partners. Make sure to include RSVP instructions.

Sample Letter to Grocery Store Manager

Re: Supporting your local food sales with a Meet the Farmer Event?

I'm writing to share an opportunity to help promote your store's local food items in partnership with my organization, [community group name here]. We're interested in holding a "Meet the Farmer" or "Buy Local" event at your grocery store sometime in [give desired event month here, but leave flexibility for them to help choose the date].

Our organization has lots of experience in working with community efforts, such as [list your group's previous events, campaigns, or other track record items here]. We have willing volunteers and great connections within the farm and food producer communities in our region and we'd love to put those resources to work on this event with you.

We know local food products are in high demand for most consumers, but that they want to be able to purchase them where it's most convenient – in your store! We'd like to help customers make the connection to the local food you're already carrying as well as help you build relationships with new producers in our region whom you may not know.

We're happy to handle the event planning, setup, and evaluation, and can assist you with vendor communications and marketing and promotions if you choose.

Please let us know if this is an event you'd be interested in hosting and what times and dates you feel would be best. I will also leave a voice message for you and am available any time by phone or email at [insert contact information here].

For additional information about us, please visit [website link]. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to talking with you soon!

PS: We are hoping to host these events in a number of grocery locations, so please let us know as soon as possible so we can lock in a date that is best for you!

Post-Event Tasks & Evaluation

Record feedback during the event. What do people say while talking with the farmer or food maker? What are their primary concerns?

Another option is to prepare a short survey – five or fewer questions that fit on a half-sheet of paper – and ask those who stop to chat at the tasting table to answer them quickly.

Leftover food items can usually be donated to a local food bank, pantry, or soup kitchen.

Within two days:

Send a thank-you email to the vendors and the store staff who helped with the event, with any additional information such as initial feedback or upcoming events. Check to see if the store manager needs any assistance from you, such as contact information for farmers or food makers they may want to carry.

Within two weeks:

Summarize event surveys – What worked? What needs adjustment for future events? Are there additional events or information that you might be able to take on in your community?

Share your findings and thoughts about future events with your local Cooperative Extension office, farmer groups, food producers, health & wellness groups, and other community advocates in your network.



References

All references and research in this guide is originally published in “Holding Successful Meet-the-Farmer Events,” a 2013 research report from the NC Growing Together Project authored by researchers from the Center for Health Promotion & Disease Prevention and the Department of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. (See next page for links to research and resources.)

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More Information



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This guide and its associated resources are available from NC Growing Together, an initiative of the Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS). CEFS is a partnership of North Carolina State University, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, and the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. For more information, please visit www.cefs.ncsu.edu.

Additional Resources

[More Recommendations for Holding Successful Meet the Farmer Events](https://www.ncgrowingtogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/NCGT-Holding-Successful-Meet-the-Farmer-Events-10-20131.pdf)

<https://www.ncgrowingtogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/NCGT-Holding-Successful-Meet-the-Farmer-Events-10-20131.pdf>

[NCGT & UNC-Chapel Hill Research on Grocery Retail Settings \(2013-2015\)](https://www.ncgrowingtogether.org/research/unc-chapel-hill-grocery-consumer-demand-project/)

<https://www.ncgrowingtogether.org/research/unc-chapel-hill-grocery-consumer-demand-project/>

[NCGT Resources for Community Advocates](https://www.ncgrowingtogether.org/for-educators-advocates-students/)

<https://www.ncgrowingtogether.org/for-educators-advocates-students/>

ALL NCGT RESOURCES ARE ARCHIVED AT [HTTPS://WWW.NCGROWINGTOGETHER.ORG/](https://www.ncgrowingtogether.org/).

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