

MU Guide

Farmers Markets and Social Media

Social Media Use and Purchase Patterns of Missouri Farmers Market Consumers

Social media is the collective term for online engagement tools such as social networks, blogging and microblogging. These tools enable people to easily share information and network with like-minded others on the Internet.

Understanding social media preferences and behaviors of Missouri farmers market customers will help Missouri farmers market organizers and vendors create effective social media strategies and tactics, and thus reap the benefits of interacting with consumers online.

As an Internet user, you have probably noticed multiple opportunities to share online content with others: You can tweet an update on Twitter, “like” content on Facebook or share a video on YouTube.

From a marketer’s perspective, social media are a suite of tools that make it easy to leverage word of mouth, spark interaction with consumers and target messages to interested individuals. Although some conversations occur naturally, such as market-goers talking about their local farmers market and their experiences there through social media, marketers can generate more buzz by engaging with consumers and providing them with tools to help them share online.

As farmers market organizers and vendors learn more about consumers’ preferences and attitudes — like those featured in this guide — they can shape content and social media messages that emphasize the consumers’ interests. Using this knowledge, they can create relevant content that addresses customer needs, invites customers to engage online and encourages customers to share the market’s online content.

About the survey

In January 2010, the Missouri Value Added Center at the University of Missouri conducted an online survey of Missouri farmers market consumers to discover how they perceive and use social media. Each of the 300 survey respondents had made a purchase at a Missouri farmers market within six months of the survey. To be representative of the state, the survey was administered in each of the five state regions the Missouri Department of Agriculture defines for its farmers market program.

Know your customer

An important step in any marketing initiative, social media included, is to learn about your customers and their behaviors. You, in your marketing role for your farmers market, can then use this knowledge to guide the creation of relevant, desired content and place it in the right media at the right time.

This report describes, first, how Missouri farmers market consumers perceive and use social media, and second, the purchase patterns of these consumers. This information was gleaned from an online survey of 300 Missourians who had purchased flowers, fruits, vegetables, herbs, spices, honey or nuts, among other products, at a farmers market within the previous six months.

As this report confirms, Missouri consumers continue to show strong interest in buying locally grown fruits and vegetables directly from local farmers or growers. This finding is consistent with the continued growth of farmers markets in the state. Between 1997 and 2009, the number of farmers markets in Missouri increased 164 percent, from 53 to 140.

Credits

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Social media use

Sources of information

When asked where they get information about their local farmers markets, the consumers surveyed most often referred to word-of-mouth exchanges with family, friends and other acquaintances (Figure 1). Eighty percent of consumers surveyed said that they have learned about farmers markets through word of mouth, indicating that consumers do talk about their farmers market experiences. Newspapers provide farmers market information to about half of the respondents, and outdoor advertising provides information to about one-quarter of the respondents. Social media was the least-used communication form that the surveyed consumers referenced. However, because social media provides virtual word-of-mouth opportunities and the tools are relatively new, social media will likely become a more important source of information over time.

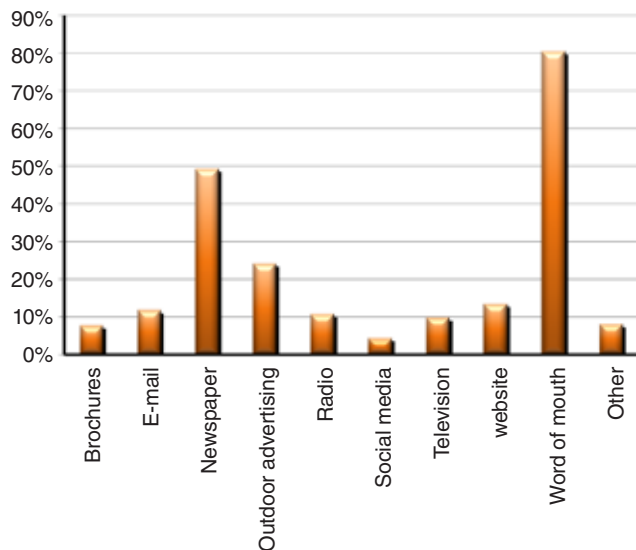


Figure 1. Sources used to learn about farmers markets (percent of respondents who have learned about farmers markets from each source).

Awareness of social media

Although they do not commonly use social media to discuss farmers market-related information, Missouri farmers market consumers are highly aware of mainstream social media. Less than 1 percent of respondents had not heard of any of the social media tools listed in Figure 2. Almost all of the respondents, 99 percent, were aware of Facebook. More than 95 percent were aware of Twitter, YouTube and MySpace. Respondents were least aware of Ning, a social network creator, and Meetup, a local networking site.

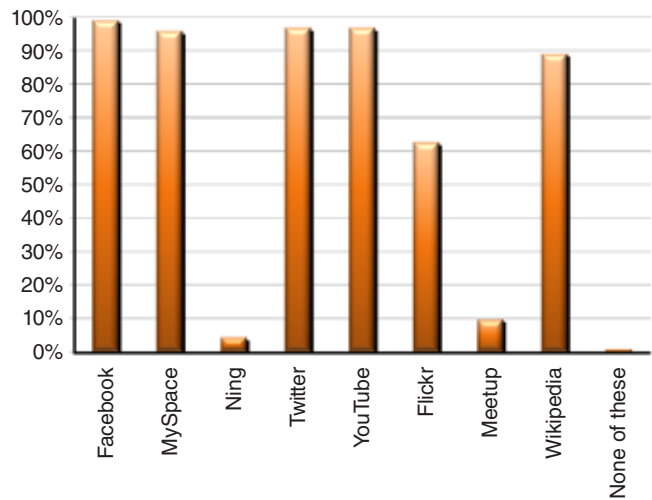


Figure 2. Social media awareness (percent of respondents who have heard of each tool).

Use of social media

Social media use is not as high as social media awareness among farmers market consumers. However, about 85 percent of the survey respondents use at least one social media tool (Figure 3). Facebook is the most popular, with more than three-quarters of the respondents being Facebook users. Half of the respondents said they watch videos posted to YouTube, about 20 percent use MySpace and 14 percent use Twitter.

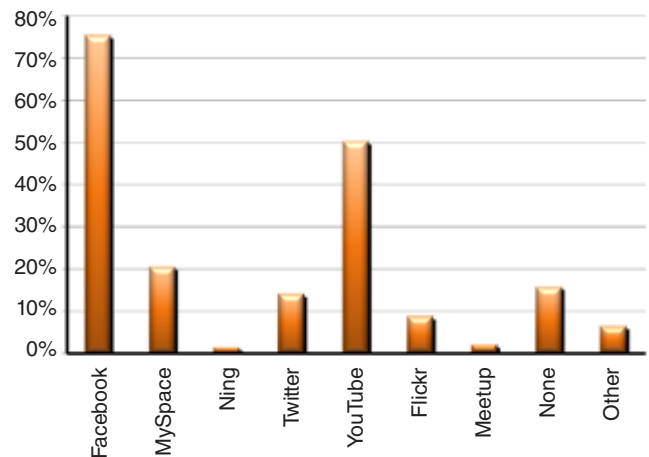


Figure 3. Social media use (percent of respondents who use each tool).

Social media sources of information

As reported above, social media is not currently a major source of information about farmers markets. About 79 percent of the consumers surveyed reported that they do not currently use social media to obtain information about their area markets. Of those who have done so, 15 percent reported using e-mail as a means to obtain market information, and nearly 6 percent use social networks, such as Facebook (Figure 4). Less often, Missouri farmers market consumers use

blogs, microblogs, review sites, video-sharing sites, photo-sharing sites and podcasts to learn about their local farmers markets.

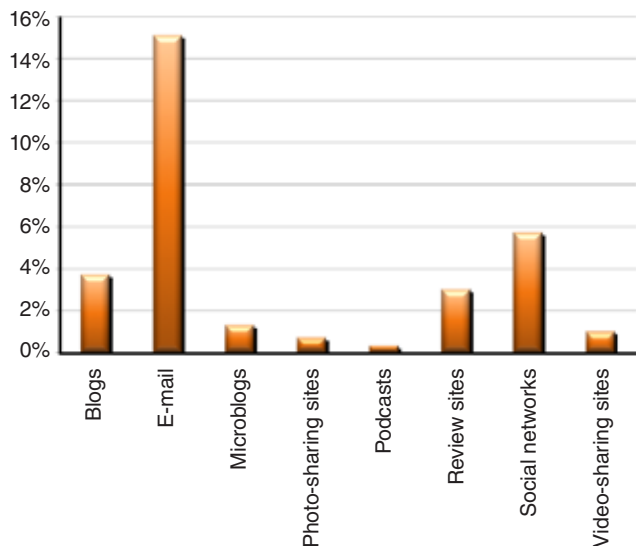


Figure 4. Social media used to learn about farmers markets (percent of respondents who have learned about farmers markets using each tool).

Constraints on social media nonusers

The social media nonusers who participated in the survey indicated that several factors constrain them from adopting social media (Figure 5). More than 22 percent indicated that lack of time was the major reason they do not use social media. Eighteen percent said they would more likely engage with social media if it involved topics of interest to them, and 17 percent would consider adopting social media if their friends

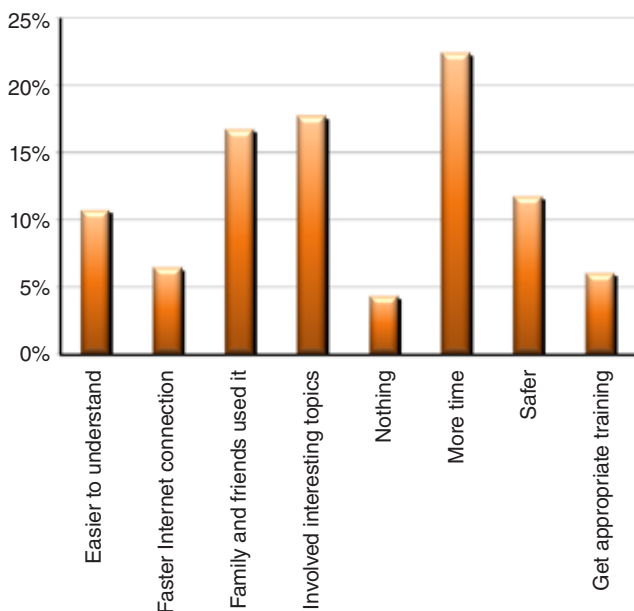


Figure 5. Factors that would cause nonusers to adopt social media (percent of respondents who would use social media in each situation).

About the respondents

Age. The average age of the respondents was 46.

35% — under 35 years of age

25% — 35 to 49

31% — 50 to 64

8% — 65 or over

Education. All of the respondents had at least a high school degree or GED, and more than 60 percent had a minimum of a four-year college degree.

8% — high school or GED

31% — some college or two-year degree

37% — four-year college degree

24% — at least a master's degree

Income. The respondents' household incomes ranged widely, with 48 percent between \$35,000 and \$74,999.

12% — under \$25,000

33% — \$25,000 to \$49,999

27% — \$50,000 to \$74,999

14% — \$75,000 to \$99,999

14% — \$100,000 or more

and family used it. About 12 percent were concerned about the safety of using social media, and 11 percent said they might adopt social media if it were easier to understand.

Engagement via social media

Marketers value social media because it provides a way to engage in targeted two-way communication with interested individuals. Although half of the survey respondents do not use social media sites to find information on brands, businesses or organizations, 32 percent of them do (Figure 6). Farmers market organizers will want to target those individuals who are predisposed to engage with organizations online, and to leverage them as opinion leaders, people who willingly share information through their online and offline networks.

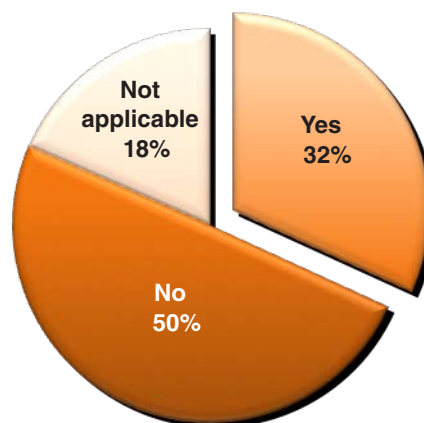


Figure 6. Social media engagement with brands, businesses or organizations.

Purchase patterns

Frequency of visits

Of the 300 Missouri farmers market consumers who responded to the survey, 86 percent visit their local market at least once a month and 14 percent visit only rarely (Figure 7). More than 48 percent of the respondents visit their market more than once a month, and 38 percent visit monthly.

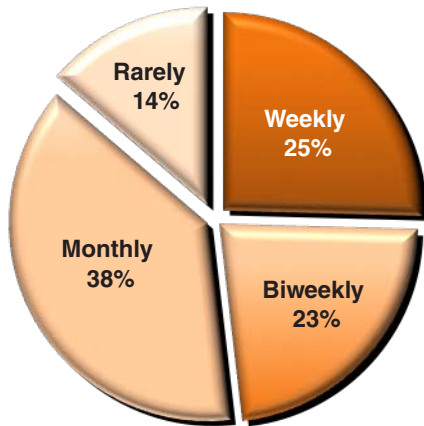


Figure 7. Frequency of respondents' visits to farmers markets.

Products purchased

Fruits and vegetables are farmers markets' biggest sellers, according to the consumers surveyed (Figures 8a and 8b). More than 90 percent of the respondents purchase vegetables and fruits at their local markets. The next biggest seller is berries, followed by baked goods, pumpkins or gourds, flowers, and herbs or spices. The food products respondents were least likely to have purchased were meat, cheese and eggs.

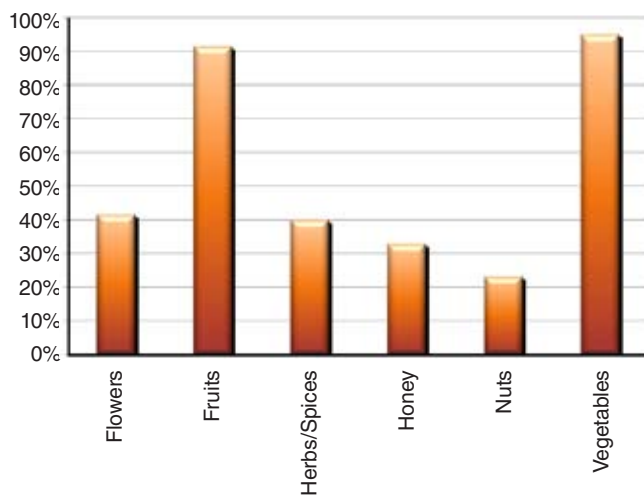


Figure 8a. Specialty crops purchased at farmers markets (percent of respondents who purchased each product).

Product safety concerns

Food safety has become a bigger issue in the past couple of years, especially as food recalls have become more prevalent. Specifically, consumers are more concerned with the handling, preparation and storage of food in ways that prevent foodborne illness. However, when asked how concerned they are about the safety of food they purchase at local farmers markets, 40.8 percent of respondents had no concern, 34.4 percent were somewhat concerned, and 24.7 percent were very concerned (Figure 9).

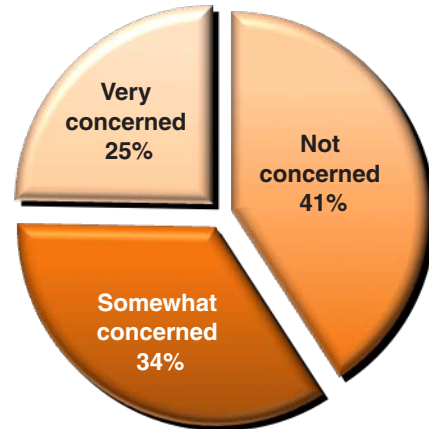


Figure 9. Respondents' concern about farmers market food product safety.

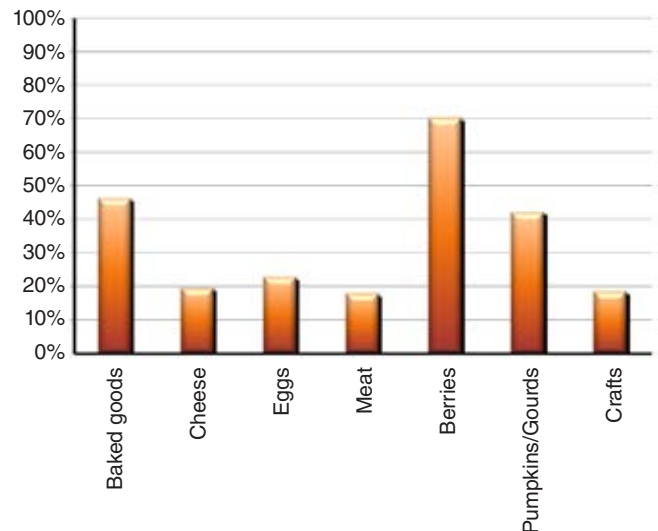


Figure 8b. Other products purchased at farmers markets (percent of respondents who purchased each product).

Awareness of market operations

The survey asked consumers a few general questions about how their local farmers market operates. The majority of the respondents reported that:

- more than 16 producers or vendors sell at the market the respondents patronize
- their local market has been operating for at least five years
- their market is not open year round — with most having a season that begins in April and ends by November

Price perception

Most of the survey respondents perceive farmers market products to be priced competitively or to be less expensive than products found at the grocery store (Figure 10). They generally perceived vegetables, fruits and flowers to be cheaper at farmers markets than at grocery stores. Meat, cheese and eggs were the products most likely to be perceived as being more expensive at farmers markets.

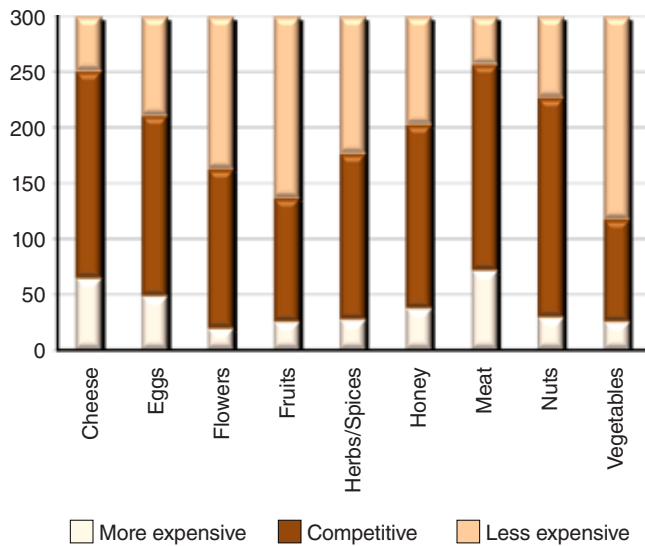


Figure 10. Price perception of products at farmers markets vs. grocery stores (by number of respondents).

Reasons for shopping at a farmers market

Price is not the only — or even the main — factor that compels consumers to shop at farmers markets (Figure 11). Product freshness was a motivator for 87 percent of the consumers surveyed. About 82 percent of the respondents shop at farmers markets to support local producers. Price ranked third as a purchase consideration. Less than half of the respondents indicated the atmosphere or health benefits were reasons to shop at farmers markets, and the ability to verify the source of the products ranked lowest as a motivator.

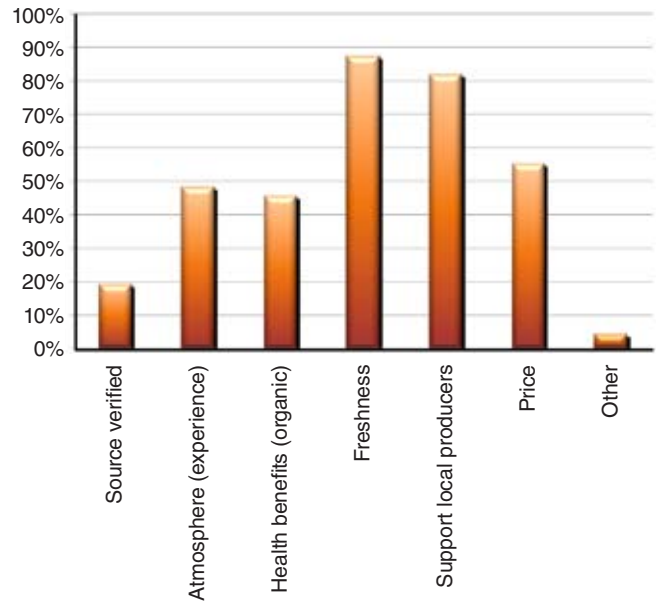


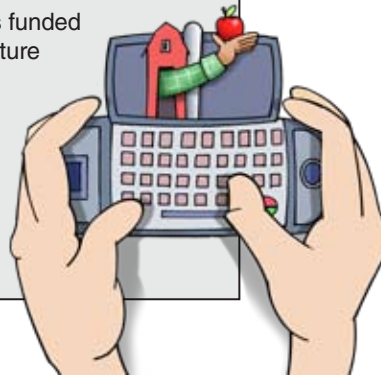
Figure 11. Reasons for shopping at farmers markets (percent of respondents selecting each reason).

About the project

The goal of the **Leveraging Social Media as Farmers Market Promotional Tools** project is to identify and communicate easy-to-understand, easy-to-use social media strategies and best practices to farmers market organizers and vendors. By applying this knowledge, the organizers and vendors can begin or enhance the promotion of their markets through social media.

This University of Missouri project is funded by a Missouri Department of Agriculture Specialty Crop Block Grant with funding from USDA-AMS.

For more resources that are part of this project, including social media how-to webinars, visit the Missouri Value Added Center website at <http://valueadded.missouri.edu>.



Also from MU Extension Publications

- G6228 *Promotional Media Use by Missouri Farmers Market Organizers*
- G6229 *Using Social Media to Learn About Consumer Needs and Preferences*

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