

## ***FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE***

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American Farm Bureau Federation

### **Farmers' Markets Put a "Face" on Farming**

*By Dal Grooms*

The number of farmers' markets in the United States has grown by more than 300 percent in the past 15 years. If you study that trend from an economics standpoint, you have to wonder why. The dollars and cents value of convenience, low prices and access to a variety of products just don't add up.

Online grocers are convenient with 24/7 availability. Farmers' markets are not.

At the local grocery store, comparison shopping to find the lowest price is done quickly as similar items are grouped together. That's not the case at the farmers' market.

Mega-supermarkets offer food purchases, along with buying your automotive care products and even appliances! Farmers' markets do not.

So what brings consumers at increasing rates to more than 5,200 farmers' markets around the country? It's the relationship that consumers can have with farmers. The Agriculture Department calls it 'food with a face.' The popularity of farmers' markets is the anchor of their current "Know Your Farmer" campaign.

That "face" reminds us that food is not made in the grocery store basement. It is grown and produced with care by men and women who not only have a passion for working with nature to produce food, but also have knowledge on how to produce it in a way that sustains their business at the market.

Much is expected from these farmers. Consumers expect fresh, top quality fruits and vegetables, as well as honey, dairy, meat and grain products. They want these items delivered with a smile and willingness to explain the production methods. If you've walked by the vendors' tables at a market, you know these farmers are delivering on both points.

Other farmers are counting on them, too. Only about 4 percent of farmers use direct sales to consumers as part of their marketing plan. That means their "faces" represent the other 96 percent of farmers who use other marketing methods to sell their products.

While some may think that's putting too much on the shoulders of those farmers who are using direct marketing, most of them would just smile, shrug and move on, shaking hands and telling customers about ways to prepare their products and what will be available at the market in the coming weeks.

Clearly, the value of a farmers' market is about relationships and trust, both of which are intangible items that have real value in today's economy. Economists and marketers have developed any number of models so that relationship value can be measured.

They can run their numbers and manipulate their models. Most consumers already know the value of that relationship. Priceless.

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