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# Promoting your Alberta approved farmers' market



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Promoting your Alberta approved farmers' market | Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Economic Development

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## Promoting your Alberta approved farmers' market

Before customers can shop at a farmers' market, they must be aware that the market exists. Getting the word out about a market takes time, careful planning and effort. It is not simply a matter of "build it and they will come."

This fact sheet will discuss the many tools available to managers to help promote their markets – from the Alberta Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Economic Development (AFRED) website and mobile app to sandwich boards, banners, websites, social media and many more. It is advisable to use multiple methods and never assume that everyone knows where or when your market happens. With 78 per cent of Alberta households shopping at farmers' markets, you want to be sure your market is on their list of markets to frequent.

## Who shops at farmers' markets and why?

According to the [Study of Local Food Demand in Alberta 2016](#), the farmers' market industry in Alberta was valued at \$924.5 million in 2016 and was expected to exceed \$1 billion in sales in 2017. Sales in this market channel have seen incredible growth since this survey was first conducted, with sales more than quadrupling since 2004.

This study indicated the demographic characteristics of those who shop most at farmers' markets are as follows:

- Both males and females equally reported purchasing at farmers' markets.
- Households with young families and empty nesters were the most common purchasers at farmers' markets.
- Households with income greater than \$120,000 are more likely to purchase from a farmers' market although purchases did occur at all household income levels.

Customers are spending on average \$70 per visit at the farmers' market, with 84 per cent of that on food products grown or made in Alberta, i.e., local food. The top five reasons Alberta consumers purchase local food:

- Food safety
- Support family farms
- Freshness
- Quality
- Taste

## Defining your target audience

The first step in deciding promotional methods is defining your target audience because different methods resonate with different audiences. Based on the information above,

you know the types of Albertans who shop at farmers' markets, but now you need to determine who shops at your market in particular and whom you hope to attract to your market. Sometimes they are not the same! Are they men or women, young or old, working people or stay-at-home moms, tourists or locals? Are you operating your market on the day of the week and at the time of day that will attract your target audience? You can always change the logistics of your market to be more attractive to your target audience.

Once you have defined your target audience, do some research on how and where that demographic likes to receive information.

- Do they commonly use social media (Facebook, Twitter or Instagram), newspaper or radio advertising?
- Do they belong to specific community groups through which you could promote?

Think about your customers' values.

- Are they seeking fresh, locally grown food for their young families?
- Are they interested in environmental issues or sustainable farming practices?
- Is healthy eating a driving force?

How does your market and the vendors in your market meet your customers' values? For many markets, your target audience will be quite diverse and you will need to use a number of different techniques to promote your market.

## Tools to Promote Your Market

You can use several tools to promote your farmers' market. Some will be more effective in your community and with your target audience.

### Word of Mouth

Word of mouth advertising can be your best tool for spreading the word about your market. Customers will share what they know about the market – the vendors, the products, their shopping experience, etc. Vendors selling at multiple markets will tell customers and other vendors what other markets they attend.

You can also help spread the word. Talk about the vendors you have coming and some of the products you have in the market. Customers flock to markets when they hear that baby potatoes, fresh peas or tomatoes will be there that week.

## Branding

Companies put their name and logo on everything they make. This is called “branding.” According to marketing expert John Stanton, “A brand is a statement of trust which a person is willing to pay for.” As a manager of an Alberta approved farmers’ market, you have a branding tool at your fingertips...the Sunnygirl logo!

Sunnygirl is an official mark held by the Government of Alberta. It is available to Alberta approved farmers’ markets to use in their advertising and promotions. This image helps the consumer identify that the market is approved and they are affiliated with a chain of high-quality markets offering Alberta-produced products consumers can trust. Use the image as part of your market branding efforts and gain customer confidence in your market.

Place the Sunnygirl image on things such as:

- Signs/banners
- Advertisements
- Customer newsletters
- Shopping bags
- Vendor aprons
- Brochures



Electronic copies of the Sunnygirl image are available from the Alberta Approved Farmers’ Market Program. Contact by phone at 780-853-8223 (dial 310-0000 first for toll-free access) or email [ab.approvedfarmersmarket@gov.ab.ca](mailto:ab.approvedfarmersmarket@gov.ab.ca).

## Customer Newsletter

Many markets produce a vendor newsletter to keep their vendors informed of changes to rules, new vendors, upcoming events, etc. Some markets also produce a customer newsletter to help keep their customers connected to the market. Use this tool to tell your customers about new products, featured vendors, seasonal produce that is available, recipes, upcoming events and any other interesting tidbits about the market. Be sure to use pictures!

You can develop a customer database many ways: sign-up button on the website, sign-up form at the market information table or an entry form for your various contests. The newsletter can be electronic and go to the database list via email or you could also print off some copies to give out at the market to entice new members.

## Government Tools

All Alberta approved farmers’ markets are listed on the mobile app and on the interactive map found at [sunnygirl.ca](http://sunnygirl.ca). The mobile app is free and available from the App Store (Apple users) or Google Play



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(Android users). Information displayed includes market dates, times and locations, contact information for the market manager, website and Facebook addresses and a mapping feature on the mobile app. Market information for the upcoming season is updated online by March 31. Changes made during the season to dates, times or special markets are updated as the information is received so that public-facing information is always accurate. Since the release of the app in April 2016, there have been more than 28,500 downloads of the app. The government offers these tools as a free service to help promote approved farmers’ markets to customers and vendors.

## Online Presence

An internet presence is critical for businesses in the 21st century. According to Statistics Canada, 94 per cent of Albertans accessed the internet in 2018, which is slightly higher than the national average of 91 per cent. In 2021, 88 per cent of Alberta approved farmers’ markets used at least one form of online promotion tool – Facebook only (38%), website only (3%) or both (48%). Many markets are also active on Twitter and Instagram. Households use the internet to search for information, to purchase products, to stay connected, etc. There are several ways to get word about your market onto the internet.

- Website  
Many markets have their own websites that describe their markets, operating information, contact information and information about the vendors. Markets often link their website with the market’s Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts so that interested customers and vendors can receive updates about the market as they happen.

If the market offers a newsletter, be sure to put a link to it on your website along with a signup link.

If the market has a website, notify the Program to include a link on the mobile app and map found at [sunnygirl.ca](http://sunnygirl.ca).

In some cases, the market sponsor also has a separate webpage. If this is the case, have them link to your market site and vice versa.

Alberta approved farmers’ markets and their vendors may become members of the Alberta Farmers’ Market Association (AFMA) for an annual membership fee. One benefit of membership is a website listing at [albertafarmersmarket.com](http://albertafarmersmarket.com). If you are interested in becoming a member of AFMA to take advantage of this additional promotional opportunity, visit their website and click on the Member tab.

- Social Media  
Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are extremely popular with markets, with Facebook often

replacing websites entirely. This is because these tools are free to use and user friendly. They help market management keep track of “friends,” share information with vendors and customers very quickly, get feedback on special events or future changes to the market, etc. If you do use social media as well as have a website, be sure to link all these tools together so that your social media posts also show on your website.

## Signs

Signs are an effective tool for promoting your market. People often drive by signs quickly and with the abundance of other distractions, your sign will have the most impact if it is well designed and stands out. A sign should give the reader the information they need to make a decision quickly. Your sign should include the following information:

- Name of market
- Hours and days of operation
- Building/location name and address
- Sunnygirl image

There are several effective signs to choose from:

- **Sandwich Boards**  
These are an effective, low-cost, portable choice. Check with local officials regarding placement of sandwich boards and how long they can remain on public property. Permitting may be required in some municipalities. Consider attaching balloons to your sandwich board occasionally to attract attention.
- **Highway Signs**  
There are two types of highway signs you could consider. The first are signs you have made locally. They need to be large enough to see from the highway and to read easily when driving at highway speeds. They need to have enough information about the market so it is easily found but not too much to be distracting to drivers. Every municipality will have rules regarding the size and placement of highway signs. Check with local officials prior to having a sign made.

The second option is the blue tourism highway signs. These can be helpful to bring in tourist traffic and raise public awareness of your market because they inform travelers of communities with Alberta approved farmers' markets. The signs consist of the Sunnygirl image and the day and hours of the market.

The cost of tourism highway signage will vary depending on the type of signage desired and number of signs. Businesses pay a five-year permit fee to cover the cost of fabricating and maintaining the sign. Maintenance of highway signs is included in your contract.

All applications for tourism highway signs must be

submitted to ATS Traffic, which administers the tourism sign program on behalf of the Government of Alberta.

Contact:

ATS Traffic

Email: [thsp@atstraffic.ca](mailto:thsp@atstraffic.ca)

Website: [atstraffic.ca/programs/tourism-highway-signage/](http://atstraffic.ca/programs/tourism-highway-signage/)

- **Banners**  
Use banners to identify your market location. A good location is across a major road/street near your market or on the outside of your building. Contact local officials to find out the rules about placement of banners. If the market takes part in a parade, re-use the banner on a float.
- **Posters**  
Place posters where your target audience will see them. Posters can be effective in the following areas:
  - Tourist information booths
  - Banks and community centres
  - Medical clinics and elder care facilities
  - Bus stations and churches
  - Campgrounds and hair stylists
- **Other Ideas**  
Be creative with your signage. Often the unusual will attract attention.



Check with city officials for available signage on buses, bus seats and shelters.

## Media Promotion

When you do a media promotion, focus on a specific target population: families, seniors or baby boomers, for example. The promotion you use may differ depending on the demographic you are trying to reach. Media such as social media, newspapers, radio and television are helpful ways to get information about your market out to the public.

- **Media Releases**  
A media release or press release is an article you write about an upcoming event or something important happening in your market. It is directed at the news media and answers the five Ws – who, what where, when, and why. Often media releases are “picked up” by the media and used exactly as sent to them or they may do some background research, interview some key players and write a story or report on it.

- **News Stories**  
Sometimes you have to “make news happen.” Develop special events and invite the media to attend. Give local reporters a story about your market, the vendors and customers. The media loves to find good local stories, especially with photos or video. Find something unique in your market such as multiple generations of vendors, young entrepreneurs or a product only sold at your market and pitch the story idea to a local reporter. You won’t have to pay a reporter to write a story; it’s their job!
- **Radio**  
Focus your energy on approaching radio stations that broadcast to your target population. To get a radio station involved, try the following ideas:
  - Once a season fill a basket of samples from the market and deliver to the local radio station to get them interested. Fresh strawberries or new peas will pique their interest and you may even get an opportunity to do an impromptu on-air interview. It will be an opportunity to educate the radio hosts – and their listeners – on the seasonality of fresh produce in Alberta as well as the unique features of all the other fantastic products on offer in the market. Use this opportunity to share even more information about the market.
  - Have a radio station do a live broadcast from your market. Having a station do a “remote” may cost you so be clear when you approach the radio station what you are hoping to have happen.
  - Invite radio celebrities to take part in a market event like a chili cook-off, pie eating or corn husking contest. You can use their attendance as part of your promotions for the event.
- **Paid Advertising**  
Paid advertisements are another option to consider. These work because you get to control the broadcast message and they gain the customer’s attention for longer periods.
  - Facebook advertising can be a cost-effective way to reach your target audience. There are two options to consider that will allow you to target based on location, demographics and profile – boosted posts or an actual Facebook ad. Decide on your advertising goals to help you determine the best approach for your market.
  - Submit ads for the classifieds section in the local newspaper.
  - Purchase ad space in the first “hard news” section of the newspaper. The bottom-right corner of the

page is best. This option may cost you more than the classifieds section.

- Purchase radio advertising that runs during times of the day when your target audience is most likely tuned in. It could be the morning show to catch those on their way to work or the afternoon drive show as they are returning home.
- Mail flyers or market coupons to your target market. If using coupons, track the return rate to determine the effectiveness of the campaign.
- Advertise your special events in local TV community calendars. This is often low cost or even free.
- Mark your TV and radio submissions as “Public Service Announcements.” Put a little note at the end that explains the market is a not-for-profit Alberta approved farmers’ market.
- For TV or radio ads, send the actual wording. Keep it short but enticing.

## Special Events

Special events serve to increase publicity, excitement and traffic at the market. Events are an excellent opportunity for community sponsors to play a role with donations and volunteer help. The following are some special events your market can try. Some activities will take more time, investment and volunteers than others. Start small and think big!

- **Local Food Week Events**  
Local Food Week was proclaimed in the *Supporting Alberta’s Local Food Sector Act* as the week preceding the third weekend in August. It generally ends with Open Farm Days, a province-wide celebration of farming in Alberta. Be creative when designing your Local Food Week events. The goal of the event is to increase awareness of local food and celebrate your local food producers and processors.
- **Contests**  
The prize can be a ribbon, a gift certificate for the market or a basket of market products. The more fun the contest is, the more likely it will drum up some excitement! When you collect personal information for the contest such as participants’ names, addresses and e-mail addresses, seek permission at the same time to add them to your mailing list to keep them informed of upcoming events, product availability or other happenings at the market.
  - **Baking Contest**  
Invite the food editors from your local newspapers or television news or radio personalities to be the

judges. They may also report on the event, helping to make your market even more popular. Work with your public health inspector to be sure you are meeting all the regulatory and food safety requirements.

- Halloween Costume Contest  
Invite children to come dressed to the market. You can have either an overall winner or multiple winners – scariest costume, meanest pirate or most beautiful princess. The children will bring their parents who will also shop the market.
- Photo Contest  
Have customers share their digital pictures of the market from the whole season. This can be a good way of obtaining quality photos of the market. Be sure to get a release signed so you can use the photos in your promotions and always cite the source.
- Chili Cook-Off  
Have the local fire crew come and judge the best chili in town! Work with your public health inspector to be sure you are meeting all the regulatory and food safety requirements.

- **Holiday Events**

Capitalize on the festive atmosphere throughout the year. You may want to hold a special market day at a different time than usual so more customers can attend. Promote the sales of seasonal products and provide activities and entertainment that will keep customers coming back year after year.

- Easter Egg Races  
Use eggs from your market and have a relay race for the children.
- Mothers' Day Flowers  
Purchase flowers from a vendor or local florist and give them out to all the women.
- Harvest Corn Festival  
Have a corn grower provide corn to cook and sell to customers. Work with your public health inspector to be sure you are meeting all the regulatory and food safety requirements.
- Appearances by Santa  
Have a volunteer dress up to entertain the children.

- **Parades**

Represent your market at community parades, either by entering a float or just by walking as a group in the event. You could even have one of your group members dress up as Sunnygirl. If your community does not sponsor a parade, find others nearby to attend. This can be a lot of fun for everyone and really helps to get the word out that your community has a farmers' market!

- **Classes and Workshops**

Have a local expert come in to demonstrate uses for products that can be purchased at the market.

- Freezing and Canning Techniques  
There is a renewed interest in learning how to freeze, can and preserve fruits and vegetables. Bringing someone to the market to demonstrate these techniques will give customers a reason to buy more products from your market.
- Local Chef Demonstrations  
People are always looking for new ideas on how to cook the items found at your market. In this case, your customers get new cooking ideas, vendors increase sales and the chef is promoting their restaurant or catering business. You will need to work with your public health inspector to learn how to make this happen. Requirements for simply demonstrating how to cook items on site as opposed to the demonstration plus tastings may be different.
- Flower Arranging  
Bring in the local florist to show customers how to arrange the cut flowers they have purchased at the market.

No matter what the event, bring your camera! Post the pictures on your website, social media accounts or include in the market newsletter. It helps to spread the word about your great events and bring in even more customers.

### **Community Outreach**

Invite organizations to the market to interact and educate the public. This can help gain goodwill within the community. Customers like to be educated about different issues facing the community.

- **Blood Pressure Check**  
Your local health professional could offer free blood pressure checks.
- **Fundraisers**  
Invite a well-known group to hold their fundraising activities or special events at your market. The group does the planning, promotion and the work the day of the event, and the market provides the space and an opportunity for additional customers to shop at the market.
- **Team registrations**  
Many sports, dance and other children's organizations have registration drives. If invited to your market, these groups will advertise where their drives are happening, drawing more potential customers to your market.



## Other Resources

There are many good resources available free on the Internet as well as for purchase through different organizations that will give you great tips on how to promote your market. Many industry associations in both Canada and the United States will have resources listed on their websites. There are also several businesses specializing in this type of information. To help you get started in your search, type, "*promoting your farmers' market*" into a search engine.

## For More Information

For more information about Alberta approved farmers' markets and how to promote them, contact:

Farmers' Market Specialist  
Alberta Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Economic  
Development  
4701 52 Street, Box 24  
Vermilion, AB T9X 1J9  
Phone: 780-853-8223 (dial 310-0000 first for toll-free  
access)  
Email: [ab.approvedfarmersmarket@gov.ab.ca](mailto:ab.approvedfarmersmarket@gov.ab.ca)