

Discongruity of stakeholder experiences at farmers' markets

This paper compares consumer, organiser and farmer experiences of participating in local alternative food markets. The literature has suggested farmers' markets to be an attractive alternative food market for both producers and consumers. Farming is a critical sector within rural economies but is uncertain and risky for those reliant upon it. Diversification through farmer retailing has been particularly favoured by SME farms as a means of alleviating this risk and associated poverty due to the minimal investment and processing required for direct sales. For consumers, markets provide access to "fresh, high-quality farm products at reasonable prices", an enjoyable shopping experience, and are particularly favoured by consumers because they "promise human connection" missing in contemporary consumerism (Hinrichs, 2000:295)

Using case-studies in the locus of farmer's markets we integrate key stakeholder perspectives on participation.

- Producers. Working with eight farmers we explored (a) farmers' motivations for farmers' market participation and (b) their business outcomes associated with that participation.
- Consumers. We gathered farmers' market shopping narratives from 20 individuals who had shopped in such markets in the previous 3 months.
- Intermediaries. Working with the organisers of a collection of farmer's markets we gathered information on the enablers and challenges of this form of alternative market.

We find discongruity between the different stakeholders in terms of motivations, practices and outcomes.

Consumers' exhibited strong symbolic and hedonic pull motivations which were linked to wider alternative market engagement. Consumers' satisfaction with farmer's market is undermined when their experiences are considered to be inauthentic. An inauthentic market, they consider, is one where crafts, ready meals and non-farming 'local' producers encroach upon the markets. We find that this inauthenticity derives from the misalignment of the practices of the organisers of farmers' markets with consumers' needs.

Organisers feel pressure to fill stalls and pack their markets densely with producers. They are remunerated based upon stallholders numbers and consider that the sites of farmers markets and seasonal uncertainty means that high density requires additional sellers beyond 'pure' farmers. Success in the form of high footfall they reason flows from 'busyness' rather than authenticity.

This practice of non-farming inclusion in markets also sits contrary to the needs of farmers. Farmers' primary motivations are push and derive from poor income and power inequality in traditional agri-food systems. However farmers' markets prove an unsatisfactory means of motivation fulfilment. While farmers' markets offer a trading outlet they prove costly and ineffective in managing episodic, cyclical, annual and larger macro risks. Despite these shortcomings farmers often stick with unprofitable farmers' markets because they don't see any available attractive alternatives and so settle for meeting lesser business objectives of driving consumer awareness and word of mouth.

This research raises important questions for the future of farmers' markets. For farmers' markets to be successful they must benefit farmers, intermediaries and consumers and this research suggests considerable and rising disincentives among stakeholders.

Hinrichs, CC (2000) 'Embeddedness and local food systems: notes on two types of direct agricultural market', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 16, 3, 95-303.

Dr Juliette Wilson, Lecturer, Department of Marketing, University of Strathclyde
Juliette.wilson@strath.ac.uk

Dr Andrea Tonner, Department of Marketing, University of Strathclyde
a.tonner@strath.ac.uk