

# How to gather market information

By Zachary D. Lyons

If you are like me, the site of someone approaching with a clipboard sends you fleeing, and the phone ringing at dinnertime spreads fear through your family. It is the dreaded survey – the “S-word” – come calling, and it might as well be a dental appointment. Given the disdain with which many seem to respond to survey takers, it is no wonder that when it comes to surveying farmers market customers, we struggle with the whole idea.

What if I told you that there is a method for collecting information on your market’s customers that is not only effective, but is also simple and fun, and your customers will actually want to participate in it? Called Rapid Market Assessment, or RMA, it was developed for farmers markets in 1998 by Oregon State University’s Larry Lev and Garry Stephenson. Now it is being used by farmers markets up and down the West Coast, in Michigan, New York and Massachusetts, up north in British Columbia, and as far away as England.

RMA incorporates four basic components: customer counting, information gathering from customers, outside feedback from other markets and regional market networking. It is designed not only to provide the individual market with vital information about itself, but also as a system of information sharing between markets. It can be employed as a “full” RMA, engaging all four components, and involving the greater re-

gional market community, or it can be scaled back to just the counting and information gathering components and carried out using just market staff and volunteers.

## Counting customers

The customer counting method, which has been scientifically tested for accuracy, requires markets to spend only 10 minutes per hour actually counting customers. It is set up to allow markets to count regularly – as often as every market day – to track customer traffic without significantly interfering with regular market chores. Having accurate customer counts is vital to attracting the interest of new vendors as well as community leaders, assessing the impact of external special events, market promotions, weather and certain crop seasons, and determining the level of community support in raw numbers.

“Before we applied RMA to farmers markets in 1998, we were shocked by the lack of data and the inaccuracy of counts and lack of sales data at markets,” said Larry Lev. “Most counting methods were arbitrary.”

Lev says that, unlike Europe, where markets are located in areas with significant regular pedestrian traffic, U.S. markets draw people in, so if a person is walking into the market, it is safe to assume in most cases that they are there to shop at the market. Thus, the RMA system is designed to count people entering markets through all possible entry points in 10-minute per hour snap-

shots, and then extrapolating from those snapshots the total number of people entering the market to shop.

“We learned by comparing normal market nights with special events that foot traffic went down during the State Fair,” said Gail Goeblicher of the Oswego Farmers Market in Oswego, New York, “and we learned that foot traffic went up during the Harbor Festival.” This kind of information allows vendors to plan their harvests better, and it allows markets to plan activities and staffing accordingly.

## Doing The Dots

The method for collecting customers’ thoughts avoids the whole concept of what most people think of as a survey to the degree that markets are trained not to even use the word “survey” in relation to it. Instead, it is called, “doing the dots.” Four questions are posted, one each on four large tripod easels and placed strategically in an area with high



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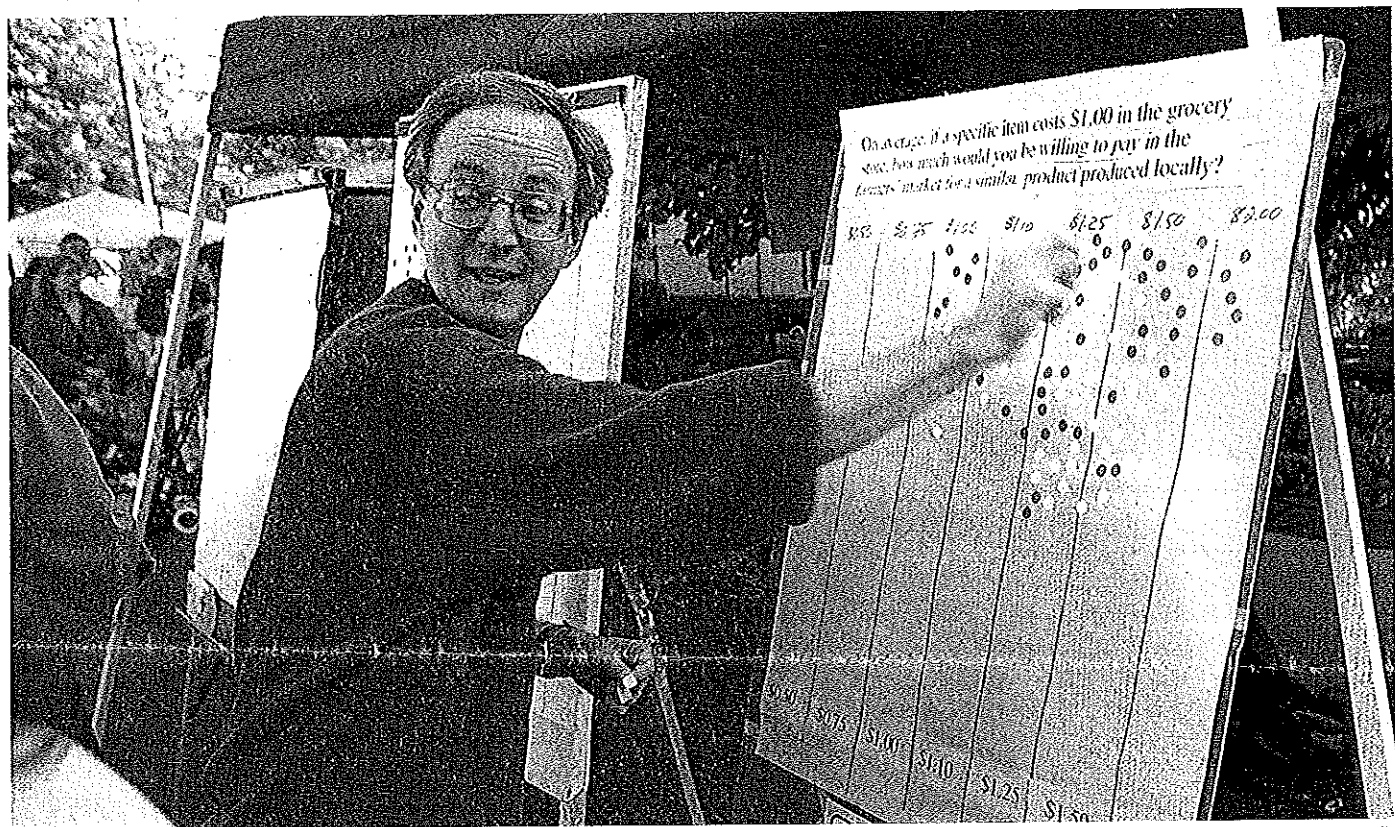


PHOTO BY BOB HOST, OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

Larry Lev, an agricultural economist at Oregon State University, was involved in the development of Rapid Market Assessment, an information-gathering system that is gaining popularity among farmers markets. Here, he asks market customers to "do the dots" on a question about prices.

and comfortable flow of foot traffic. Under each question are multiple possible answers. Customers are given four dot stickers and asked to place one dot on each of the four easels under the answer to the question that most closely corresponds to how they feel. Lev has found that market customers asked to "do the dots" do so at a rate of 90 percent or higher, as opposed to a rate of about 12 percent for standard long-form clipboard surveys.

"For gathering more general statistical information, especially consumer-related, doing the dots is the most effective," said Jeff Cole, Executive Director of the Federation of Massachusetts Farmers Markets. "It is easy, colorful, and it creates an activity that engages market customers in their market, raising their level of commitment and support. And when they come back in future weeks and see that their input has led to positive changes at the market, it makes them feel empowered."

"After learning the RMA system, we would never use another form of information gathering from our customers, except perhaps the occasional online survey," said Melisa Evangelos, Executive Director of the Tacoma Farmers Market in Tacoma, Washington. "It is quick and high volume. We are able to get the opinions of 1,200 to 1,500 people in a five-hour market. We have used the dots to determine the demographics of our customers – where they are from, how much they spend both at the market and at neighboring businesses, the kinds of products they would like to see at the market, even market hours and special events they would

like. We use that information to educate downtown merchants, the Chamber, the City and other community leaders, as well as the media. We learned that less than five percent of our customers get information about our market from advertising, so we reassigned much of our advertising budget to more effective areas."

The Portland Farmers Market, which operates four markets in Portland, Oregon, varies the questions it asks several times throughout the market season. "We ask about what products customers want more of, what they would like to learn from the market, what percentage of their weekly grocery budget they spend at the market and more," said Senior Market Manager Hallie Mittleman. While varying the questions helps them learn more about their customers, Mittleman also would like to develop a pattern of asking some of the same questions each year. "Hollywood Farmers Market [also in Portland] asks many of the same questions every year," said Mittleman, "so they can track fluctuations in customer opinions over time, and compare them to changes at the market."

### The Full RMA

The Federation of Farmers Markets of New York has been training its member markets in RMAs since 2003 by organizing several full RMAs each year, said Federation Director Diane Eggert. A full RMA incorporates all four RMA components. In addition to customer counts and doing the dots,

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full RMAs utilize representatives from other markets, state agriculture and university extension agents and local and regional community leaders to actually do the customer counts and dots at the target market. Often these outside members of the greater farmers market community gather with the target market's staff and board the evening before the RMA to discuss the plan for the next day, consider the questions for the dot easels, and generally network and get to know each other.

At the end of the market day, after the RMA is concluded, these outsiders gather for a debriefing with market staff to present feedback and observations of their own, offering the target market the benefit of fresh perspectives while allowing the other markets to consider what they learned that day from the experience. Later, after the customer count and dot data are compiled, the group reconvenes via a conference call to discuss the results. This expanded RMA process not only serves to educate the broader farmers market community, it serves to strengthen it as well by developing and reinforcing relationships between markets. "While our member markets learn from this process how to do the counts and dots on their own in the future," said Eggert, "the importance of the outsider observations of the full RMA process can not be overstated."

### Surprising lessons from the dots

I asked Larry Lev to tell me about show-stopping lessons learned by markets from doing the dots.

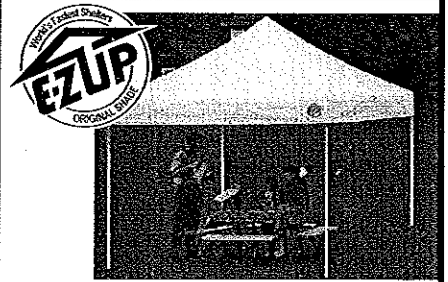
"England's Winchester Farmers Market, one of the U.K.'s largest markets, with 100 vendors and 10,000 customers, used to only operate one day each month," said Lev. "It seems markets in the U.K. move from one community to the next each week, with most, like Winchester, only operating monthly. Vendors worried that if the markets happened more frequently, sales would not increase, but the time commitment would, and that they would end up stealing customers from other markets, apparently in the belief that market customers traveled from market to market. When we asked Winchester market cus-

tomers if they would like the market to operate more often, 90 percent said yes. It turns out that most of the market's customers are local, much like at U.S. markets, and in the end, when Winchester switched to a biweekly schedule, sales and foot traffic at each market remained the same, meaning that total sales at the market in effect doubled.

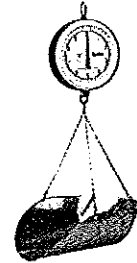
"Another lesson we are learning at market after market is the impact they have on neighboring businesses. Take the Corvallis [Oregon] Farmers Market, for instance. Neighboring businesses were quite resistant to it, fearing it competed with them for parking. But during nice weather in the summer months, few people were coming into downtown Corvallis on weekends. Using customer counts, we showed that the market changed that, drawing some 3,500 people there each week. Using the dots, we showed that they were spending money at neighboring businesses."

Larry Lev's team at Oregon State University has prepared a 21-page document called Tools for Rapid Market Assessments that provides clear instructions for going about staging an RMA. It is a good read, and can be downloaded at <http://smallfarms.oregonstate.edu/marketing/publications.php>. However, it is a good idea to have your market staff formally trained in the RMA process, preferably through an full RMA, by an experienced trainer from your state's farmers market organization or agriculture extension service. You can also see samples of RMA reports at <http://smallfarms.oregonstate.edu/publications/reports.php>. 🐾

*Zachary D. Lyons is a freelance food and agriculture writer based in Seattle. He served as Executive Director of the Washington State Farmers Market Association from 1999-2005, and he served on the board of the National Association of Farmers Market Nutrition Programs.*



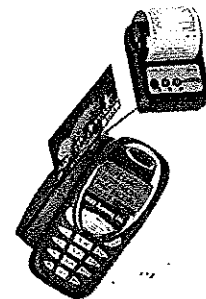
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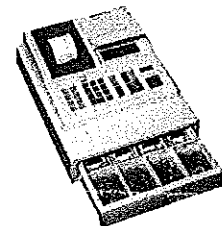
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