

If I knew then what I know now – Juliet Fay shares her thoughts
after a decade doing Farmers' Markets

Farmers' Markets Hit Britain

In September 1997, the first Farmers' Market in the UK launched in Bath. The aim was to resurrect a local urban market outlet for farmers to sell their produce. Ten years on and there are more than 500 Farmers' Markets in the UK. I was at that first market with my organic pork and today, from our farm in Wales we take free range poultry to Haverfordwest Farmers' Market in Pembrokeshire every fortnight. The farmers and the markets have come a long way in 10 years.

That first Farmers' Market Bath September 1997

Back in 1997, for a small scale producer, the Farmers' Market was a godsend allowing us to get among the chimney pots. At those first few markets it was a fantastic buzz as shoppers crowded into the market under the vaulted glass roof of the Victorian Green Park Station. After 4 hours trading our stalls looked as if a hurricane had been through. The produce was gone; we were in shock.

The honeymoon period ended and then we began a steep learning curve. In the early days, just the logistics of getting to the market were challenging enough. You could spot the retail virgins, like us, the ones arriving flustered and late after dealing with escaping stock or other unexpected farm events. We had to get to grips with a whole new department of our business.

If I had sat down and actually added up the hours required to prepare for and operate the market stall, I would have realised that we needed more resources.

We also grew vegetables for a box scheme and so the pork was an add on for us. At first we just took what we had available. Now we plan our production around key peaks in the year. Easter and Christmas obviously for poultry, but down in Pembrokeshire, summer brings plenty of self-catering visitors.

The stall holders early encounters with the public were most interesting. Memorable moments are the pigs head with apple on a plate (not ours). Back in 1997, the public weren't ready for that. Less than 5 years ago, a photo of live chickens in the field, on our stall, elicited a yelp of "disgusting" from a passer-by, shocked by the reality of where chicken meat actually comes from.

Understanding your customer is an ongoing and often fascinating undertaking.

Presentation of stalls

As we conquered the challenge of just getting there, we turned our attention to how our stall looked. How I envied those with colourful produce (even our 'Golden Welsh' chicken does not draw the eye like a bunch of carrots) and even more, those who clearly were further up the queue for artistic talent than me. What I lacked in visual arts skills I made up for with words. I spent many a late night creating labels, posters, newsletters, recipe sheets and other items for our stall.

Our market rig: from freezers to purpose built trailer

I do not miss trying to do Houdini style contortions in the back of a small van while embracing a chest freezer! As time went on we refined our transport. What bliss when my trailer finally had a ramp!

The community spirit of the markets was never better illustrated for me than during my third pregnancy. At Haverfordwest Farmers' Market, a couple of traders regularly unloaded and set up my stall for me when my bump slowed me down too much. I couldn't have done the market without them.

Involve your customers.

You know your own products so well, you can forget to communicate for example, all the ways to cook it, or interesting health facts about your produce, even disaster stories (our customers loved the story about the pigs escaping and trampling the onions). They all help to develop that relationship with your customers.

Some people love doing the markets; others find it a chore. I was slow to understand the power of good selling techniques.

If its good the product will sell itself....won't it?

For me a FARMA organised course titled, Seductive Selling in 2006 revealed a whole new world to me. Aimed at farm shop owners and farmers market stall holders, it presented selling in terms of solving problems for your customers. So where better to solve the problem of “what shall we have for dinner tonight” than a Farmers’ Market.

The course made me think about our products more from the consumers point of view.

We looked at engaging with customers, brightening up their day.

Providing something different to look at, talk about and so on.

We are fortunate in Farmers' Markets that, on the whole the customers are enthusiastic and supportive of us. When they are not, I found this invaluable, "Just remember, the angry customer in front of you may have received his/her divorce papers that morning." This course is the one thing I wish I had done earlier.

Adding more value to your produce

Once we realised that we could make more of our 4 or 5 hours trading by innovating and communicating we experimented with adding value to our farm produce. At our peak we were selling Guinchickducks – a boned and rolled guinea fowl inside a boned and rolled chicken inside a boned and rolled duck. A conversation piece that brought people back to us to buy for special occasions.

A good way forward?

Firmly established now in the public's mind. Farmers' Markets remain an excellent opportunity for farmers to bring their produce to market. As with everything in life, you get out what you put in.

Juliet Fay also provides specialist marketing and copywriting services to farm retail and other businesses. For more information visit www.julietfay.co.uk or phone 01267 249057

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