

Featured Guest Interviews

Laura Vree (@bradfordfarmersmarket)

Laura Vree: [00:00:13] My name is Laura Vree, I am the market manager at the Bradford farmer's market located in Bradford, Ontario. I am also a small business owner myself. That's how I got involved in the market. And yeah, so I've been running the market for a number of years, through COVID and beyond.

Diego Footer: [00:00:32] In your view, what role do you see farmer's markets playing in the current food purchasing landscape?

Laura Vree: [00:00:41] I think that the role they play is to help people connect to the local community. First of all, I think that for us, as a market, in a town that's growing quickly, it really helps people understand our agricultural roots, to actually talk to a farmer and to sort of remove that big corporate umbrella that seems to hover over all this food production that actually comes from real people. So to make that connection and I think it's especially important during COVID because there is such fear, and having a human connection helps take some of the fear away.

Diego Footer: [00:01:24] Yeah. Yeah. That's really well said. And what's been your experience just hearing from customers over the past year, do you find that they value local maybe more than they would have in the past? I know the market's been around for 14 years, but did you see a change that was triggered by COVID?

Laura Vree: [00:01:44] Yeah, I think that...I think especially the early days of COVID, which is the timing of how it all came about. I mean, the COVID thing really rose quickly in March and our market traditionally opens at the end of May, so we had it like a two-month window to figure out what was going to happen.

And if you can think back in those early days, it really was so—there was so many unknowns. Like, can you touch things? Can you—and one of the things that we used as a marketing method, but also our customer said to us, even without us saying it to them, was if we get it from a farmer, it's one set of hands that have touched it. Instead of going to a store where not only all the people who, you know, from the farmer to the person who holds it in the truck to unloading, to putting it in the displays, but also all the other customers who could have touched it before I got to it. So that shorter connection from field to customer seems really important to our customers.

Diego Footer: [00:02:44] Yeah, no, it definitely does shorten that chain. It ties back to those agricultural roots. Like you said, it connects people in a community. And we're talking online farmer's markets now, just to start to set the table for that.

When you think about the role that a farmer's market plays, and it is providing that connection. I can go talk to a farmer. Is there some worry around moving that online because you are removing the face to face in-person connection. Depending on how, depending on pickup, obviously, how it's done.

Laura Vree: [00:03:21] I think we worried about it before we had set up how we were going to do it. Certainly we...knowing how important that is to us and to our customers, that was a big worry for us. But we quickly figured out a way to make that connection anyways. And for us, it was a connection in a safe way. So we felt safe doing it. And I know, because I heard from our customers, they felt so safe picking up in that way. And also because we were also starved for human connection. This was something so almost magical for our customers.

And the way we did it was we actually had our customer—er, vendor set up in a row safely distanced because those were the rules. And, we allowed our customers to drive past each one of our vendors. They would like really just pass them by and stop at the end, but nothing stopped them from stopping in front of their favorite vendors and shouting out a hello, I'd be 12 feet or more apart, but still making that connection.

And so we didn't lose that per se, whether it's yelling through an open car window from 12 feet distance or you're standing directly across from the table. That's okay. The conversations I overheard where, you know, the typical, yeah, we had a lot of wind last night and, all the crops were okay and yeah, no, we didn't get any hail. And those conversations still continued, or next week we're going to have strawberries.

And I felt it and I know our vendors felt it and certainly our customers that we still were able to connect because otherwise we were locked in our homes, right? So we don't feel we lost the connection.

Diego Footer: [00:05:00] Yeah. Do you find that there's a subset of farmer's market shoppers that like, this is not just where they buy their food, but this is where they, like, they derive a lot of meaning from this: supporting local, having those conversations, building relationships with people where really, they're purchasing something, but it transcends that for a part of the market base?

Laura Vree: [00:05:31] Yeah, absolutely. And those, we did, there was a lot of customers we didn't see, and I think those are people who didn't have that connection. We see them all now because now we have opened booths, and they're still running online. But there was a huge number of people. For them, it was there's a connection to a human being that that human feeds me, that human, I care about them and their family.

That's something we always try to promote is the farmer and their family, like, this is because we want the customer's family to feel like they know our vendors' families. So for a lot of people, absolutely. It transcends more than just buying something. It's about getting to know these people, getting to support these people. A lot of people struggled, and they knew that buying from us was helping people directly. So absolutely.

Diego Footer: [00:06:31] When you think about the early days of COVID, and what you were faced with, probably thinking or knowing we're not going to be allowed to reopen physically. When you thought about moving online, what were some of the initial thoughts that came into your head about taking the whole market online?

Laura Vree: [00:06:52] Well, it was hard to imagine, first of all. The market experience really is about walking around and chatting up with neighbors. Even me as the market manager, I mean, for me, it's a social event. My friends stop in, and we get to exchange hugs and we get to catch up on what, however long it's been since we see each other.

So that was a really difficult—you know, while we're thinking this, you're looking outside and there's no cars and no people, like the world has stopped. And now we're trying to figure out how you take that vibrant, five-hour experience and try to salvage it into something. So that was really, really hard to imagine.

And I have to tell you, we spent a lot of hours brainstorming how we could make it...how we can make it work, like what it would look like. And could we make it something more than just putting food in someone's trunk? And I feel like we, without breaking any rules, 'cause I really, really strongly felt we needed to follow every rule to the T. I think we were able to get something. Like, something that made people feel happy.

It's so funny because we had the other day, people were coming wearing masks now. They didn't in the beginning, right? But now, people are still come in wearing masks, and we mixed up two ladies, and we know their names because we see them on the sheets and everything. And we approached what, and I said, hi, Michelle. And she goes, it's not Michelle. It's Colleen. And she goes, actually, I think I know which Michelle you're talking about. We went to university together, and it's so funny because I had a connection with these ladies one-on-one, and I never really put it together that they also have a connection outside, you know?

Diego Footer: Yeah.

Laura Vree: Like, that was so strange to have these relationships that were so independent of one another when in fact, these people probably know each other. There's just no way for them to socialize in that line now. But yeah, that was a really interesting phenomenon.

Diego Footer: [00:08:57] Right, right. No, it's cool to hear that. And if you think about all that brainstorming that you did, along the way, somewhere in there, you decided, okay, we're going to give Local Line a shot. When you decided to move forward on that of we're doing this, we have a platform, did you have any worries up front initially, now that you've committed to going down that road, and you've picked out your choice of software to make it happen?

Laura Vree: [00:09:24] No, actually. I wasn't the one who did all the vetting. I was in some groups, and they did a lot of the vetting. It was basically down to two options. And I was more drawn to Local Line. At this point, don't remember why, but I do think that the reviews on Local Line were higher. I also used to live in Kitchener, and they're based in Kitchener, and I guess I had a little soft spot for them for that reason.

But, like, Local Line was so supportive. I do have a technology background, so that wasn't an intimidating factor to me. I know for some people that it would be, but once I made the commitment, I felt really great in the choice we made, and very supported by Local Line. So I wasn't that worried once we made the decision.

Diego Footer: [00:10:14] What about vendors? What were their thoughts at that point? You're moving forward. Hey, we're doing this. It's going to be on Local Line. The market's on, you're in the market-style model where it's up to vendors to put their own account online and list all their own inventory. It's not hub-managed where you would do it. So you guys have said, alright. We're going to say, or we're going to move forward with this. Now it's up to you as a vendor to take the next step if you want to. What were some of the initial vendor responses you heard?

Laura Vree: [00:10:48] I think it ran the gamut. I think we had some vendors who were super excited because some vendors already had an online presence. So to them that wasn't a huge deal. Some vendors were very hesitant, but were eager enough to make money that they were willing to do what it took. And to be completely honest, there was some vendors that I had to set up their stores for them because they were so technologically challenged, but they figured it out. I got them set up and then I walked them through. But we did lose vendors that just were absolutely never going to go to an online format and were willing to wait it out to see until they could just open up in person.

Diego Footer: [00:11:32] What do you think their reservations were?

Laura Vree: [00:11:36] This is a little controversial. We actually lost that vendor that I'm thinking of permanently. A little bit of COVID denial. Yeah. It's actually a touchy subject for me, but yeah.

Diego Footer: [00:11:48] Okay. Yeah. We don't have to dig into that.

Laura Vree: [00:11:49] Yeah, no, I mean, it's COVID denial. They were perfectly willing to open up. They still don't really want to wear masks. I mean, it's that kind of thing. So I think that they weren't willing to, I think they were—they didn't like the idea of technology. They specifically said they believe that farmer's markets are about being in person. I didn't really buy that, but over the months, I think that it that's what it really came down to, which they didn't tell us at the time, so.

Diego Footer: [00:12:14] Yeah. And if you look back, and we're probably about a year since you opened that market initially.

Laura Vree: Yeah. Yeah.

Diego Footer: What have been the results of that? How do you feel about that? It's tough with COVID, but if you remove the COVID, we had to do this because of the COVID part of it. If you just look at now having an online option. What are your thoughts on that?

Laura Vree: [00:12:41] I think it's...I feel very positively about it. I feel like it's an option we would have never considered because of how we feel about what a farmer's market is like, that in-person option. But even now, like we now have an open market, people can walk through the market, but we have continued with the online, thinking that there are still people who aren't comfortable shopping in person.

I actually put a question out two weeks ago to our customers. And what I actually heard back was for some people, they just think it's so convenient. They love the convenience of having someone load their stuff into their car. There are some very heavy vegetables and produce up there. For some people it's a lot to walk through a market, carrying all that stuff. We have people who love the format because if they're not early morning people, they often get to the market, and their favorite things are sold out. This guarantees that they don't have to set that alarm clock on a Saturday morning 'cause their stuff will be there ready and waiting for them.

People who have young children who don't want to wrangle them through the market. This is I've never thought about these things, but I was thinking we were going to start like tackling down and start to get fewer and fewer customers, but it's staying steady.

We're not getting as many customers as we did last year, but we were able to run our markets through most of the winter, which we've never been able to do because of this online option. And those customers that we had all winter are still our customers every single week. So, again, I never would have expected this, but at this point, like our vendors don't want to give up those sales.

Diego Footer: [00:14:23] Right. And you're located in Ontario, it's cold in the winter. So I'm assuming you don't run the farmer's market in the winter because it's an outdoor location, you don't have an indoor location. So normally it shut down, and vendors would be on their own. But the online platforms allowed you to continue the farmer's market for the vendors that want to keep selling.

Laura Vree: [00:14:43] Yeah, exactly. So we lucked out with weather. We knew that if there was ever like a really bad Friday or Saturday snowstorm, we would have to think on the fly that day and figure out how to get products to our customers because we have vendors that come from a distance away. But we usually stop on Thanksgiving weekend.

We have a couple options for, like a couple of weeks, we do a couple indoor markets. It's not ideal, changing locations right away, you lose customers. And it's just a one-day thing. If people don't get the message, they don't come. But we were able to just stay open all the way till Christmas instead of having a three-hour pickup window, we went to a one-hour pickup window, which was completely tolerable for all of us standing outside. And then we closed down after Christmas, and opened up again in March, which, so we were just closed for three months instead of five plus months.

And our vendors were so appreciative. It's like our farmers, for years, they've been saying to me, I wish we could come back next week on Thanksgiving weekend. I wish we could come back next week because I still have so many things in the field, but we have said all year long, Thanksgiving weekend is our last weekend, so we're not setting up next week. And this gave us an opportunity to keep on selling. And I've always said, this is something I would always say to our customers. I've pretty resentful when the week after Thanksgiving, I have to go get my groceries, my produce at the grocery store, and I can only find non-local produce knowing it's in those fields. So this was an opportunity that we were also thankful for, and we think we'll just keep continue that do that regardless. We just wouldn't stop doing that. Why would we? It's so easy.

Diego Footer: [00:16:28] From the management side, on being the market manager. If you think about all the work that it goes into managing a weekly, physical, in-person farmer's market on one hand, like everything that goes into doing that versus running it online, how do your tasks vary or workload vary if you compare physical versus online? I'm thinking online has to—it's different, but it has to be less work, but maybe I'm wrong. What do you think?

Laura Vree: [00:17:05] Yeah, I think it's much less work. And I'm thinking physically. And even vendors have said this to me. So for me, as market manager, I am there early on a Saturday morning, about two to three hours before the market opens. And I'm setting up tents, not vendor tents, booths for the entrance and musician and all that kind of stuff. That all falls on me to put weights out, I'll have to put tables out, I have to put chairs out, I have to put benches out, I have to put garbage cans out. There's all that physical stuff.

And then you have five hours and hope that you can get all those customers in five hours. And the number of times we've had people say, Oh, I missed it today is it open tomorrow? Or they show up as we're packing up. Oh, I didn't realize it was a market, right? Like you have a five-hour window in a whole week.

With the online market, I could market it, our store was open for four solid days. So for four days, I could be marketing it, social media blitz and yeah, Okay, I just have to sit in a chair and enter products. And then on Saturdays, we had to hand out products, but physically, it was so much less work. And we even had one of our vendors said to me, this was my best year ever because I didn't have to set up a tent every week.

Like people underestimate how hard it is to set up these tents. Like, you set it up, it breaks. You've got to invest another couple of hundred bucks on this crazy tent. and yeah, like I think a lot of people in markets reach burnout because of the tent set up.

And so while we are now open as physical market, and the truth is, for a lot of vendors, sales are better with an open market than an online market. We have four vendors who have stayed online only for a variety of reasons, but one of them is that they don't have to set up a tent.

Diego Footer: [00:18:58] Yeah, why not? I mean, if you can do the same amount of sales from and make it a lot easier, sure. That day for you, hours-wise for an in-person market, what does that look like?

Laura Vree: [00:19:11] Eight or nine hours? Market's open five.

Diego Footer: [00:19:14] Okay. So you're starting at what time in the morning?

Laura Vree: [00:19:17] Our market used to open at eight, we've now moved it to nine, but I would arrive onsite around 5:30 when we opened at eight.

Diego Footer: [00:19:25] So 5:30, and you're there till two in the afternoon?

Laura Vree: 2, 2:30, sometimes.

Diego Footer: So a long day.

Laura Vree: Yeah.

Diego Footer: When it comes to managing the online side, what have you decided to take control of, and then what have you left vendors in control of?

Laura Vree: [00:19:46] So, I'm the person who opens and closes the store every week. Actually, just added a new vendor to the online store, and they accidentally had his store open right away. So, I sent them a note and said, no, no, no, no, no. I'm in charge of when his store opens once he has set it up, and I double check it. Then I'm the one who toggles the on switch.

And everything else was up to the vendors. They put in their pricing, they put in their pictures, they put it in the product descriptions. And then I run the social media side of it. I do a blast email once a week, and then I promote the products that are in the store. So last year was a lot more intense because I felt like I had to, especially anytime there was a new

product being added, I wanted to put that out. I want it to showcase each vendor for sure on our social media. So yes, it was a lot more intense. Yeah, that's about it.

Diego Footer: [00:20:45] You're right. I was talking to another farmer's market manager, and I was talking to her about if you're promoting an in-person physical market, it's really, come down on Saturday or whenever. You have this five-hour window, and you're trying to get them to do something in the future. And you can also promote the vendors and the products that will be there, but it's always a calendar item. It's not something they can respond to now.

How has marketing been different for you given that now, you can say here's Joe Smith farm and their amazing tomatoes. They're for sale now in our online store. So somebody can read that post, and assuming your store is open when you're posting, they could buy now versus in the past, it's come on Saturday to get them.

Laura Vree: [00:21:31] Right, right. Yeah, that was one of my favorite parts because, when I would do, I could see the number of orders we had in and, when I would send out our email blast, we'd watched the numbers rise really quickly 'cause that email would come in, people would read it.

I know people would say to me, I'm waiting for the email so I can access the link, which I mean, I just type LOC and boom, it pops up for me, which I guess some people just don't have that, computer savvy. But so they would look for that email, look for the link, and then do their shopping, so I knew that was happening.

I feel that other market managers' pain so much because that's exactly right. You would start of promote, promote, promote. And then later you hear, oh, I completely forgot about it on Saturday morning. And even though people had it in their mind that they want it to go get those awesome tomatoes from that farmer, by the time Saturday rolled around, they have forgotten it.

So one of the challenges, and depending on my week, I meet that challenge or I don't in a physical market. I get there super early. I set up all the tents. Right now, we have to do all kinds of extra work with securing the perimeter and having a queue area for people to line up to get in 'cause we're limited on the number of customers we can have in at any one time, set up all the safety barriers, like all the things.

And then I have to promote, because my thinking is always, when you roll out a bed in the morning, the first thing people do is grab their phone. And if I'm lucky enough to get in their newsfeed with a reminder that the market is on, perhaps they're going to put on their clothes and drive on over. And the jobs on Saturday mornings are sometimes so overwhelming that I can't even get to social media till about 11:00 AM. And then now I only have a two-hour window to grab them.

So yeah, there's something really great about all those customers that have already ordered and can come by and pick up. We already have that sale that money's already in the bank, and we don't have to hope that they remember.

Diego Footer: [00:23:30] I know it's early with having physical and online operating in parallel, but do you have a sense in how much of a net gain there has been from vendors who were getting the, I'll call it the online bump?

Laura Vree: [00:23:47] No, I don't have any sense of it. I'm trying to think if I have any way to figure that out. No, I'm sorry. I just don't know. I don't have any idea.

Diego Footer: [00:24:02] That's okay. What about in terms of assisting vendors with getting set up online? I know it's fairly simple, but did you come up with any sort of Hey, here's a procedure that works. Here's a document that I created. How'd you grease the wheels to make it as easy as possible for them?

Laura Vree: [00:24:23] Yeah, so, a number of the vendors came on at one point. And like I said, I have a small business myself. I actually was also a vendor in the online store. So that was good for me because I really had great experience with it. And it's funny because, I access Local Line in three different ways as the farmer's market, as my business, and as a customer. I have incognito windows open all the time because I'm always trying to access things differently.

But, so when I set my store up, I then figured out all the details on how to do it. And then I had to set up a couple of other vendors, so I would log in as them and set them up. Like, we have one guy who is so technologically challenged, if I hadn't done it for him, he wouldn't have been part of the market, and he's really thankful to be in it. But he does it all on his own now.

But in doing that, I just did take notes. And then when a vendor joined a few weeks later, I just sent him those notes just in detail, go to this. Do this, go to this, do this. And then I've had a couple of new vendors come online in this last week. And it seems like they're able to navigate it themselves. I did get something from Local Line directly on the sort of the setup. And then if they have trouble, then I'll just go in and help them. But yeah.

Diego Footer: [00:25:37] So it sounds like it's pretty straightforward and there hadn't been a lot...

Laura Vree: [00:25:41] It really is. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Yeah.

Diego Footer: [00:25:44] What would have been some vendor feedback? I know you mentioned one who said, okay. Like the no tent thing. I'm staying online. I love it. It's great. But what have vendors said about the online experience?

Laura Vree: [00:26:00] I think that given the circumstances, I think they loved it, still being able to connect with customers. It's interesting to see 'cause I do have the report at the end of the week, I guess I should have said that as one of the jobs for a market manager. So I do have the report so that we can distribute the products when they arrive for pickup.

And it's interesting cause people will put notes in there, right? So there's a lot of thank you's. People are so thankful, and they continue to this day, you know? But I think that vendors... Yeah, I think vendors are just happy to have this avenue to continue to sell their products. Like it was a pretty bleak time at the end of March, April last year. And what are you going to do with all these products that you have that you can't sell? So yeah, I think that they're really thrilled about what we were able to achieve.

Diego Footer: [00:26:47] What about on the customer side? You see the thank you notes. Has there been any customer feedback that you got that, really, I don't wanna say surprise you, but just stood out in terms of okay, people are really glad that we have an online option?

Laura Vree: [00:27:04] Yeah, the best story I have is about a couple of ladies who would come every week to the market. And we got to know all the customers by name and by car. So you'd see the car driving up, and you would just start yelling out so-and-so's here, and people could gather their products for them. So like the connection we made is so different than a traditional market.

In a traditional market, you see a face. And you recognize the face, but there's rarely an opportunity to say what's your name, right? So, it's just based on a face. Or if you pay attention, maybe you'll hear somebody say their name, and then you can remember. So, we have everybody's names.

And these two ladies, they're sisters, they came every week. Great customers, very friendly. And throughout the season, because we never did open up a physical market in 2020, and we did that for a variety of reasons. We didn't have washroom access. We would be a traditional market, I'd be on-site for up to eight hours. Without a washroom, that's an impossibility, of course.

So we decided for us, at some point, we thought at first we would open a physical market, but then as the whole COVID situation kept going and going, we decided that it didn't make any sense. And let's just say it now, we're going to be online all season. And of course, I felt a lot of guilt about that as the market manager, I knew that people wanted a real market. I knew we'd lost a vendor over it. And I really questioned whether or not we did the right thing.

In the beginning, I wasn't going into any stores, but over time, I did start to feel more comfortable and would go into a store. So I thought, I'm sure our customers are irritated with me at this point, right? Because I felt like I was the decision maker, even though I do answer to a board.

Near the end of the season, one of these two sisters came, it was close to Christmas, and they actually parked the car and got out. Everybody was fully masked, and it was safe. And they had gifts for all of us. And we were really shocked, like this was so unexpected. And so, I said to the one sister, I said, I'm so flabbergasted that you would do this. And she said, you have no idea what this did for my sister. She has been battling so many different health issues, and it was completely unsafe for her to shop at any store. And this was her lifeline.

And that's when I knew I had made the right decision. And for them to share that with us, and for them to be so thankful every week, like these people came to us every single week in the last year are just the best people. So thankful, so kind, so happy. But these two women really stood out for me and all of us knew we had made the right decision at that point.

Diego Footer: [00:29:49] Yeah, it's an amazing story. And it goes to show that just because this storefront is online, that product still has to be exchanged from the vendor to the customer. So you are still maintaining a connection point there. It's not just shipped via some courier, and it shows up on their door. So you do have that point. And I think that's an important, but subtle point because it does absolve some of the worry that people have about that in-person connection.

In terms of the pickups, you've done this for a while now. What have you found works for pickup logistics and have there been any things that you guys have changed because there was just inefficiencies or things that were problems? Again, ignore that the COVID spacing and

all that, but just in terms of getting product from vendors to customers, what would be advice you'd have on farmers setting that up?

Laura Vree: [00:31:05] One thing that I think really worked well for us is, we were in a parking lot. I heard lots of different ways that people were doing it 'cause I attended quite a few webinars and Zoom-type calls where different markets were explaining how they were doing it. And I know that some online markets sort of—like, one really stood out in my mind. I don't know which market it was. It was here in Ontario.

They would meet three hours before customers would come, and then they would do all the sorting. And we were outside, we didn't have the ability to do that, and some things needed to be refrigerated. And how do you manage all that kind of stuff? And we were in a parking lot, and we work very hard putting pylons out in strategic positions so that people would know exactly which way to drive. And then when they approached us, we would get their name, and I have a loud voice, I would call out to the vendors, and they would start gathering the things.

And then we would just run by, walk really fast by their tables, grab the products they had set out for that particular customer, and then the customer would have driven to the end. And so then by that time, we just stick it in the trunk of their car, and then they could drive off. It sounds crazy, but some of our vendors were more popular or had more products to hand out than others, so we made sure that they were clustered together so that when we had to do the walking sometimes, if like for example, you'd see a car coming knew who it was, call out to everybody, they would get the products ready, but a vendor that didn't have as many customers just didn't have as many orders, we put them at the end so that we didn't have to walk because I had a Fitbit and I was doing a lot of time steps. And so we got to the point where it's like the fewer steps, the better.

So yeah, clustering our most popular vendors together was really important for us. And that this year with the market being open, we've really had to rethink our strategy. Like I said, I thought maybe it would die off, but I think it's going to hold steady at least for the remainder of the year. And, we've had a couple of weeks where it was a real challenge.

And so last week, especially, we've really worked hard on figuring out how to set up our distribution area. So we're now under a double booth, and all the vendors bring their online orders to us. And then we set it out in a way that makes sense for us because we need to have a place to put. Our produce from our farmers comes in big black bins, and we would push the bins to the side when they were empty, and then we'd find ourselves tripping over them.

So we really had a plan. Once we have emptied the bin, it goes here. These most popular vendors, their things are here, and this is a table that customers can use for pickup with a sign so that they don't go to the wrong area. Really, logistically, we have to make it work because even though we now have a longer window to distribute the food, it's still a challenge and we have to worry about parking and making sure people aren't getting stuck, getting hit by a car or whatever. It's just busier. So, yeah. So that has been a challenge, and we're still working out the kinks, but we're getting closer.

Diego Footer: [00:34:10] Right, right. So just to make sure I got this correct. So, the drive-through model is a car queue.

Laura Vree: Yeah.

Diego Footer: Car pulls in, and you have the vendors lined up. A name gets called out of the customer. Each vendor already has that customer's stuff pulled outside and then somebody from the market basically goes down the line of vendors with a cart or something and gets all the orders for customer A. They get to the end where customers parked. It goes into the trunk. Next customer's up.

Laura Vree: [00:34:42] Absolutely. Yeah, it worked really great. Yeah.

Diego Footer: [00:34:44] Now with the market running physically, you have a separate pickup booth just for online order and pick up. Before the market, all the market vendors bring their online ordered product there, and it's already labeled John, Sally, Kim. And then when that customer comes, okay, where's all the Kim orders, I'm going to pull those. Here's Kim's stuff. She's on her way. Got it.

Laura Vree: [00:35:14] Yeah, exactly. Yep. And we have sheets. Like I said, I create them, I pulled them into Excel. I have tweaked them over the year. Like for example, so say, for example, I buy five items from our farmer. It would have my name, it would have my phone number and the item. The vendor and the item and how many, and then the next line would be my name and phone number again, and the farm and the vendor, and then the product and the number of each product. And, I was printing a lot of paper and it was using a lot of ink, so I would make sure that it would only print my name or the customer's name and phone number once.

So I would really go in and tweak it, and I'm very well-versed in Microsoft office type products. So I'm really speedy at it. But I wanted this report to be really easy to read and make as few mistakes as possible. These are products that people have paid for. And so, I want to make sure they go home with what they need. So I found that having the quantity at the end of the line would sometimes make people miss it. So I moved it more to the middle. So that, for example, if they got eggs, they would have to go right now into the cooler.

It used to be the vendor would get them out for us, but now we have to do it ourselves. And so we go into the egg cooler, and if it says eggs, and you don't check to make sure if it's one or two, you might only get a one. So, I've moved that number and I'll highlight the areas that I know we make mistakes. Sometimes a vendor that has both refrigerated and non-refrigerated stuff. If you sometimes just see that vendor's name, and you see the item, you might not think to also go into the cooler. So I highlight that to make that work because if we make a mistake, I'm the one who has to drive into the customer's house.

Diego Footer: [00:36:50] If you have product like that that's already containerized, jams, dairy product, eggs. You just have them set aside. Do you have the vendors label them? And then it's just up to the whoever's fulfilling the order just to make sure that they're grabbing everything or is it just, if it's dozens of eggs, here's a bunch of dozens of eggs, the right quantity to match all the online orders. And then it's up to the responsibility of the farmer's market worker to say, yeah, what's that quantity, two? I put two.

Laura Vree: [00:37:20] Yeah. So it's a combination. For eggs, yes. She doesn't label the eggs. It's unnecessary, eggs are eggs. But there are things, yes. So almost everything else is specifically labeled for a customer. And so it's just, you just go in and grab the bag with the customer's name on it, and we actually ran into a very interesting issue the first week of our, once our market was open. Again, we started back up in March and again, we were doing the

drive-through model. And then on May 22nd, we went back to the booth set up, and vendors dropped the stuff off to our distribution booth.

And one of our vendors has a lot of frozen products, and he has his own labelling system that we didn't understand. For example, he sells pierogies. And my daughter who helps me in the booth said, I don't even know what pierogies look like. So we really struggled because he would have a V. And that stood for something, but we didn't know what it stood for. And that first week, we kept having to run to see him at his booth. And what is this? And mistakes are made, but customers were very understanding. And so he's now perfected his thing where the products, say for example, they get three packages of something. He puts it in a paper bag and writes the name on the paper bag. That's cleared up all our problems, but that was definitely a learning curve for us in that first week, so.

Diego Footer: [00:38:40] Yeah. It's I could see that in any sort of fulfillment operation, standardizing, clear writing, clear labeling, eliminate all the guesswork, make it obvious.

Laura Vree: [00:38:49] Yes. Yeah. It's more work for him, but it's better than having customers be unhappy and having to fix problems, so.

Diego Footer: [00:38:58] If you think about the customer base that you have at the farmer's market, we talked about that group of people that just love going to the farmer's market, and they love making those connections. Do you think by going online, you've increased your reach in terms of customers because there are some people, either for health concerns or just life situation reasons, going to a farmer's market just doesn't work for them, and now by offering an online option, you've captured a customer that would have never otherwise gone to the in-person farmer's market?

Laura Vree: [00:39:40] Yeah, I can't say with 100% certainty, but there are certainly people that we had not seen before. And of course, sometimes you just don't see them because they don't come to your booth. But in talking with the vendors, new to them kind of people, and we'd also hear the feedback. Oh, I'd never been to the market before, and this is great. I love this format.

So whether those people in particular are still only doing online or whether now that they know our online market is attached to this physical market, whether they're actually coming in, I'm not sure about it. And again, we are in a fast-growing community. And so some of those brand new customers could have been people who just weren't living in Bradford in 2019.

And we do also have, I know for sure we have a couple of customers that while I know they used to walk through the market, physically, they no longer can. When you open the trunk, you see the walker in the back. So you know that, physically, it's getting more and more difficult for them. And so, as a matter of fact, when I sent out my question, to our customers a couple of weeks back, asking how they feel about continuing with the online market whether or not they want to, and overwhelmingly, everybody wants us to continue with it. One of the responses was from a lady who said, I can no longer physically walk the market. So, this is how I'm going to continue to shop.

Diego Footer: [00:40:56] Given that, what would you say to other farmer's market managers that are considering online? If you look at all your experience that you've had in some of these saying that, I don't know. What do you think Laura, should I do this? What would you tell them?

Laura Vree: [00:41:14] I would tell them they have nothing to lose. Everybody now knows how to shop online. And whether you're targeting customers who are having trouble navigating physically, or whether you're targeting customers who want to be guaranteed to get the products they love.

You have vendors who sell out every week, and every week you have people who are disappointed, and you can tell them, you don't have to be disappointed, you can order online. Whether you want to give vendors an opportunity to sell that might not be able to set up.

Like for example, one of our vendors, they sell a product that they create themselves, but in addition, they sell products from their—I'm trying to think of the right word to describe it. Their community of farmer friends, their big thing was when the markets, 'cause a lot of people do take part in winter markets and in March of 2020, even winter markets were closed. Like all markets were closed. And these people suddenly had no avenue to sell their products. And that's when a lot of these people went online.

But this particular vendor, she now comes and sets up a booth, but stays in the online market to sell all these other products because she's not coming with a cooler full of steaks, unless those steaks have been pre-bought. So, that gives you an opportunity to have other vendors in your market that don't have the ability to set up a booth.

There's only so many people on a farm to go around to set up Saturday markets, but their products can now be sold. I just don't feel like there's anything to lose. You're gonna get sales from it. You could extend your season in a way that you might not have ever considered before. And you're going to target people who might not want to walk the market.

Diego Footer: [00:43:03] One last thing to close it out, and you seem pretty savvy on the tech side of things. What have you found has really worked to promote the online market?

Laura Vree: [00:43:18] I think that email list is really important. And of course, you can cultivate emails from Local Line once people have signed up. Our email list grew dramatically because of Local Line. But social media I think is hit or miss. If you can encourage your customers to share their stuff. And of course, we have lots of people who love to share their purchases. There's something about a farmer's market purchase that makes for a great social media post.

So social media is given because it's free. Emails is a given because it's free. Paid ads could work. Local media that's willing to share with you is a great way to do it. And word of mouth. Like, I'm not ashamed to come out and say, guys, if you are willing to promote us, we can only get better. And asking people to make the connection with their friends and neighbors to promote us, that's a great way to do it. And, yeah.

Diego Footer: [00:44:15] Do you think that some of the less popular vendors have really benefited from having the online store? And here's what I mean by that: in a physical farmer's market, anyone you pick in the new world, you're going to have a bell curve of vendor. Some are just going to do great every week consistently. And some aren't going to. When you bring them online, the customer's now going online to maybe they always buy from the great vendor, but while they're there, they're also exposed to all the other vendors and have the opportunity to see product that they might not normally see. They might just beeline for that booth every week, and that's what they're looking for. What are our thoughts on that kind of distributing out more views?

Laura Vree: [00:45:06] I am the perfect example because I've been a part of the market for 11 years. And I obviously spend lots of time checking out every booth. I'm taking pictures of every product every week. And I bought more things last summer than I have ever bought. And I tried more new products because there's something about seeing them, just one product, and reading a description about it, that when your eyes look over a table, you might miss.

I was never really buying any honey products. I must've bought like, well over a hundred dollars' worth of honey last summer, because I'm like, wow, I didn't know this existed. Oh, I've got to try this. And so yes, I wholeheartedly think that this is a way for customers to get a different exposure.

I completely agree with you. There are customers that come into the market, go to the one place, and then leave. And scrolling through the—and I would always encourage people to do that if you don't. Cause you know, you can just go into the online market and just pick your favorite vendor. But I will say to them, every once in a while, just take some time and go through each item, just go through the whole store and see what there is to offer. You'd be surprised what you find that you didn't know we've carried.

And, so I know I was doing it, and I think that it certainly works for smaller vendors. And I also think that we can't overlook the benefit of having—one of the things that was a huge selling point for us especially at the beginning of COVID when things were hard, like making money was difficult, is anybody who had a product that wasn't like a jarred product or something that, for example, honey, if you don't sell it, you bring it back home. Any of our bakers, any of our farmers, there was no waste.

So if you're in an online store, you get your orders. And then you make your product or pack your product. And when you leave on Saturday, after all of yours have been picked up, there is nothing to throw in the garbage. There is nothing that you have, like, you couldn't even give it away, of course, at the beginning of COVID, but like our farmer said to us too, at the end of the day, lettuce we haven't sold, whatever, it's too wilted. We're never going to sell it.

So there's that waste factor that is completely eliminated. And that I think is also something that's really great for a vendor to never go home with product that's unsold. So not only are you getting this extra exposure by being in the online market, but your sales are happening in a way that's beneficial to you. And I'll just add this. I actually had to close my business. I run a gourmet cookie store and I had sold for years at the farmer's market. And I closed my business. And when COVID started—and I was running the market. And I was happy doing that.

And then when COVID started, and we started the online store, and I was watching what was happening, I actually have restarted my business that I've been back selling for the last year and with great success. And there's something much nicer about making stuff that I know is already sold than making stuff and thinking, I hope it sells tomorrow. So for me, it's been really great. So I'm a customer, and I'm a vendor, and I run the market, but I love all of it. I'm a little biased, maybe. I'm not the best interview.

Diego Footer: [00:48:29] No, I love your passion, your enthusiasm, insight. What about increasing the variety of farmer's market offerings? So if you have, I know at some markets, they'll say, okay, we don't want more than two meat vendors because they don't want them

competing into the other. But if you have, let's say to meat vendors and that's the limit for meat vendors, and neither one wants to go online. As a market manager, would you consider saying, okay, if there's other meat vendors that just want to sell online, we'll take them. We can't take them in person, but if you want to go online like this, can you fill in gaps that are missing online for vendors that don't want to sell online and thereby offer more stuff online?

Laura Vree: [00:49:15] Yeah, I think so. That wouldn't be a decision I could make. I would have to take it to the board, but I think that we actually did lose one of our vendors, and someone else was able to fill the void in the online store. And it is happening now. We do have a couple of vendors that don't sell online, and other vendors have been able to fill that void.

So, yeah, I do think that there's—and personally, the one that sells online, I like his product better. So if I had to choose between buying at the market or buying from him, I would buy from the online store. Yeah, I think that if we had that situation say, with to meat vendors and none of them wanted to go online, but someone wants to join the online store. I think that would be enough of an incentive for someone to join the online store because if you want to build your business on both sides, I think the possibility is there. Absolutely. Yeah.

Diego Footer: [00:50:10] Last question. How did you decide on the opening window for the online store of, I think you said four days that you have, and a lot of vendors probably say, like I only want it open for two, that gives me time to predict. Some want it open seven days a week. Why four and how has that worked?

Laura Vree: [00:50:32] So we did four. We right away knew that if we could accept orders until Thursday, then we could have Friday to prepare. So any of our bakers would then have a full day to prepare and our farmers would be—it's funny, one of our bakers bakes overnight, so he could take orders, personally, he would be willing to take orders until Friday at 6:00 PM, cause he doesn't start baking until then.

Some of us like to sleep on Friday, and obviously our farmers can only work during daylight hours. So he couldn't take orders till 6:00 PM on a Friday because he's got to gather his things and set up the boxes. And they could probably take orders and Friday morning, but then we also have vendors who then have to—like the person who brings in meat from other farmers, she needs Friday to get those orders picked up, and she needs to tell them by Thursday evening what she needs. We have to please a bunch of different people. And, so that's how we decided to stay open until Thursday at 9:00 PM. And then have Friday just to prepare orders.

It would be really great if every vendor could swing it, that we could be open till Friday at 6:00 PM because people do start thinking more about the market on the weekends. It's just not possible for everybody to have that later time. But we did discuss it numerous times.

And we talked about leaving the store open till midnight, but I don't stay up till midnight. And since I have to manually close the store, I said no to that. But having said that, truthfully, we could be open just on Thursdays, 90 to 95% of our orders come in between 6:00 PM and 9:00 PM on Thursday.

Diego Footer: [00:52:11] So there's something there, the urgency last minute. Get it done.

Laura Vree: [00:52:15] Well, and I think that, like, it's okay, the store is closing, and I always send over reminder messages on social media. I always use the same picture, watch the clock.

The store's about to close and always, we get some orders right after I send that out. And I send the email out on Wednesday, and we start getting orders starting at that point.

So I send the email on Wednesday, the orders start coming in, I always picture some people have already turned off their computer or they don't check their email till the morning. So we start getting orders on Thursday morning. And then we close the store at nine, but I think people are like, what do I need for the weekend? I have to start thinking about my grocery list.

And so the first few weeks, yes, we were getting orders at 9:00 AM on Monday mornings, but then I think people started thinking, okay, wait a minute. I don't actually know what I'm going to need by the weekend. And so yeah, we could run it for one day.

Diego Footer: [00:53:07] That makes sense, the food cycle, right? You're buying stuff over the weekend. You're eating it through the week. You're not running out until the end of the week, right?

Laura Vree: [00:53:14] Yeah, exactly.

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