

Consumer Opinion at Oneida County Farmers' Markets

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Farmers' Market Resiliency Grant

Cornell Cooperative Extension
Oneida County



**Agriculture
and Markets**



Introduction

Through the Farmers' Market Resiliency Grant, the Oneida County Public Market (OCPM) conducted consumer surveys at Oneida County farmers' markets. The survey was comprised of 29 questions regarding consumers' opinions on food selection and quality, customer service, transportation to the market, programming, availability and applicability of SNAP services, and general demographic questions regarding age, gender, and ethnicity. Consumers were given the opportunity to complete the survey that was developed and managed through Cornell University's Qualtrics program, as a paper or digital version by scanning a QR code or following a link on OCPM social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram). There was an incentive for participants; upon completion of the survey, they would be entered to win a vacuum sealer and a hydroponic kit. Consumers would also receive stickers or pins for coming up to the table. Survey sessions were conducted at 8 of the 11 farmers' markets operating in Oneida County between August 28 and October 8, 2024. Survey sessions were held two times at each market with some exceptions. Boonville Harvest Market was surveyed once, Vernon Center, New Hartford and Utica were not attended, and the Oneida County Public Market was surveyed four times.

Methods and Data

In total, 15 survey sessions were conducted in person and continuous access to the survey link was available over the course of 41 days. The display during market sessions consisted of a table with a "Make Oneida County Farmers' Markets a Better Place" table covering, free stickers and pins with the same logo, a "Farmers' Market Survey Giveaway" sign, as well as various Oneida County Cornell Cooperative Extension promotional material for programming. Consumers were able to approach the table of their own accord to complete a survey or discuss market attributes. Attendance at each market varied based on the weather, location, popularity of the market, time of day, day of the week, and time of year. The sessions attended after mid-September saw a decrease in attendance across the board, and thus a decrease in survey responses. Market sessions that had pleasant weather and high vendor turnouts typically saw higher response rates and overall attendance. A total of 206 responses were recorded over the duration of the survey. The digital survey link was shared multiple times over the 41 days, with increased response rates shortly after posting and sharing.

Methodology Analysis

The method of conducting in-person surveys and having a digital link to the survey was chosen based on time constraints. Due to the grant period beginning in August, the survey needed to be conducted before the market season ended. 8 of the 11 markets in Oneida County close between late September and mid- October. This gave us a limited window to gather data, so conducting surveys at the markets prior to the season's end was crucial. 81 in-person surveys and 125 digital surveys were recorded over the 41 days. In-person surveys were entered manually through the survey link after they were collected, allowing for all results to be tabulated in the Qualtrics program to reduce the possibility of errors. We found that having in-person survey sessions at markets allowed consumers to voice concerns and positive attributes of their market to someone who was receptive to hearing them. By the end of the survey sessions, a plethora of opinions and constructive criticisms about markets were received. Consumers were assured that by conducting the surveys, the results would be shared to improve farmers' market and continue promoting local goods.

Survey Analysis

With 30% of total responses, the Oneida County Public Market had the highest percentage of responses, likely due to the familiarity their patrons have with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Oneida County and other surveying that the market has done in the past. Whitesboro's market had the second highest percentage of responses, 16%, and third was Clinton at 14%. Concerning our question regarding what markets in the county were regularly attended, the responses were similar. The most regularly attended markets in the county are OCPM with 46%, Clinton with 34% and Whitesboro with 26%. The lowest attended markets include Vernon Center with 1%, which only started this year, followed by both Oriskany and Boonville (Elks Lodge) at 6%, and Vienna (Verona Beach) with 7%. This tells us that not all the markets are equally visited across the county. Based on survey responses and knowledge of these markets' operations, this could be due to a small selection of produce and meat with a narrow variety of vendors. These markets typically had fewer than 5 vendors for 2024, minimal advertising to the region, and have either just begun, or are in a newer location.

Many respondents were able to find products they were looking for most of the time, while some always found, sometimes found, and found half the time what they were looking for. This indicates that there is an overall good variety of vendors throughout Oneida County farmers'

markets, but not a great variety within markets. Clinton consumers have the largest variety of products, with ample selection for produce, meats, artisan goods, and baked goods. Their respondents felt as though little to nothing was missing from their market, besides an additional vendor or two offering ready-to-eat food. As a whole, respondents were satisfied with the types of products at markets, with 85% of responses claiming they were always, or most of the time, satisfied. However, respondents did feel that there were gaps in variety across most markets. 42% noted ready-to-eat food was missing, 29% said dairy products, and 22% said bread/pastry. It is important to note that 18% of consumers felt that produce was missing at our county farmers' markets. This sentiment was felt strongly at the Oriskany and Whitesboro markets as several consumers believed there were little to no farmers selling produce or that the selection was very slim. Other repeated write-in responses indicating missing items from markets included honey and specific value-added products like pickles and jams, while several comments indicated they wished there was more variety, more selection and more vendors.

In Oneida County, accessible public transportation to and from a market can be challenging if community members don't live near bus stops, have mobility issues or have limited free time. We found that only 13 of the surveyed respondents rely on public transportation or ride shares, whereas 177 people did not. This could be because they live within walking distance to the market, so they chose to walk or ride their bikes, or it could be due to bus route availability in Oneida County. An inference can be made that those who utilize public transportation wouldn't be able to attend most farmers' markets. The Utica-Rome and surrounding areas proved to have limited access to farmers' markets for those without access to a vehicle. The more populated areas around city-centers like Utica and Rome have multiple bus routes that are accessible daily with numerous pick-up times. Those living in parts of our county outside of those city-centers, do not, unfortunately, benefit from the same as these areas are not easily accessible by bus. Although rideshare companies like Uber and Lyft have gained popularity in the region, they can be a costly expense for consumers and have limited availability. In Oneida County, a large portion of residents use their own means of transportation and have, on average, 2 cars per household. This aligns with the data from the survey, given that 177 people do not rely on public transportation. Since Oneida county doesn't have a large enough urban center that would require a more robust public transportation system, this was expected.

Consumers were also surveyed about the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). We discovered that 90% of respondents do not use SNAP benefits at their farmers' markets and

96% of respondents either knew or were unsure if the market they were at accepted SNAP. This suggests that consumers are unaware that some markets accept SNAP, or that it was even an option to use SNAP benefits at farmers' markets. Because of this, it is not surprising that 83% said that a market's participation in SNAP acceptance did not influence their decision to visit. The findings were similar when consumers were asked if they only attend the markets that accept SNAP; 91% said no. Out of our 11 county markets, 6 of them accept SNAP. These markets could have increased attendance and sales from the populations of people who benefit from SNAP, if they advertise that it can be used at their market. The markets that are located closer to town centers like Rome, Whitesboro and New Hartford could potentially see an increase in attendance if they accepted SNAP and made consumers aware of this benefit to attend the market.

Having onsite market managers is critical to market success. Through the survey we found that 36% of respondents needed at some point to interact with a manager while at the market and 55% of respondents said there was not a customer service table present or were unsure if one existed while at their market. By having a managerial presence at a farmers' markets to assist attendees, answer questions regarding rules and policies of the market and provide a place where vendors can go if issues occur during a market session, a safer and more organized environment is created. Numerous respondents voiced that they were unsure if the market they were attending had a manager or if there was some type of information table. This even happened at markets where there was a manager onsite. Managers that properly identify themselves and their market information table in a spot that is easily accessible to consumers will most likely have less confusion from customers and they will be able to relay market information in a more accessible way.

We found that 54% of respondents visit an average of 4-7 vendors when they attend a market and 28% visit 0-3 vendors. This means that even at larger markets with 20-40 vendors, like Clinton and OCPM, consumers are only visiting a handful of them. Often, consumers get in the habit of going to the same people to buy items from without seeing what other vendors have to offer. Vendors that promote and advertise their brand and/or display their product in a more appealing or accessible manner may have a competitive edge over those that do not. 70% of respondents said that vendors always provide satisfactory customer service while 24% said they receive satisfactory customer service most of the time. Vendors that establish and build good relationships with customers will often see them return time and time again. This rapport begins

with good customer service skills and listening to customers' needs and concerns, while maintaining a professional yet friendly presence.

Some markets provide various types of extra activities, or programming, at their markets. This can range from musical performances, food demonstrations, children's activities, and more. Our survey indicates that 54% of those surveyed either knew that their market didn't offer programming or were unsure if they did. Farmers' markets that have additional draws like these types of activities cast a wider net in terms of their audience. Culturally inclusive events like diverse music groups, food trucks, or a play area help attract more communities to farmers' markets. The most popular types of programming respondents were interested in are children's activities, music performances/entertainment, and programming about food/crop growing/cooking.

Depending on the market and the structure of the management, there are varying budgets for marketing and advertising. Even with marketing budgets, 50% claimed they heard of the market through word of mouth, 30% saw a road sign, and 26% saw it on social media. While several mentioned that they happened to be driving by or just live in the town, so they "just know" that there's a market. For some markets like OCPM, there is a substantial marketing budget compared to other markets due to an assortment of grant funding. The OCPM is able to use a considerable amount of funding towards billboards, radio, and tv advertisements, which interestingly only account for 10% of responses regarding how survey participants heard about markets.

The Oneida County Public Market operates an e-commerce website where consumers can purchase products in advance from a selection of OCPM vendors and pick them up during operating hours at the market. Even with substantial marketing budgets put towards OCPM's e-commerce site, marketgoers in the community are unsure of the site and have little to no interest in using it. 75% of respondents surveyed had never heard of the e-commerce website, 97% had never used it before, and 86% would either not use it or might use it. At its peak, the site saw increased use during the pandemic and shortly after, supporting a sufficient number of vendors and regular customers. Post-COVID, consumers seek to have a physical market experience, create connections with local producers, and be involved in their communities. It is clear that a thriving and inclusive physical farmers' market is preferable to the community with survey results demonstrating a lack of compatibility between the Oneida County Public Market e-commerce platform and Oneida County consumers in today's climate.

Conclusions and Actions

The survey results highlighted three areas of improvement for the OCPM, which can be applicable to other markets. These areas include: market promotion, product variability, and market programming. The main objective of farmers' markets is to sell local products and support the farmers and vendors that grow or create those products. To succeed, farmers' markets need a variety of vendors primarily selling local produce, meats, dairy products, and baked goods, but also vendors with artisan goods like soaps, jewelry, and wood crafts. The overall objective of markets can be achieved through consideration of a consistent audience base with loyal and regular customers as well as occasional shoppers. Consumers need to be regularly made aware and informed of the markets in their community through various means of communication. This can include word of mouth, social media, tv ads, and signage. Communicating in a clear, concise, and consistent manner will promote the markets.

Respondents were more likely to hear about the market they were attending by word of mouth and on social media. To promote the market season, more handouts will be created that can be distributed to communities and organizations that promote all of Oneida County's farmers' markets, highlighting those that accept SNAP and methods of transportation. Consistent and regular posts on social media like Facebook or Instagram can potentially draw a younger audience. Simply asking customers to tell their friends and family, giving them a flyer to distribute and sharing posts on social media could increase market awareness and attendance.

Farmers' markets that have a wide array of vendors, products, and community tables are typically ones that are well known. Markets that have low vendor turnout should be actively sourcing vendors or looking for options to bolster their vendor participation. The OCPM will work to maintain a robust variety of vendors that span all sectors of local commerce. The area that will be most beneficial is the retainment of food truck vendors preparing ready-to-eat food. The ready-to-eat food vendors are a significant draw for attendance as they will keep consumers at the market for a longer period of time, potentially enticing them to spend more money at local vendor booths.

Respondents and marketgoers were repeatedly asking for programming involving children's activities, musical performances, and food/agriculture-based activities. Consumers are likely to come to a space where they can multitask shopping and activities. Allowing parents the ability to shop while having their children entertained by an activity space, music, or educational

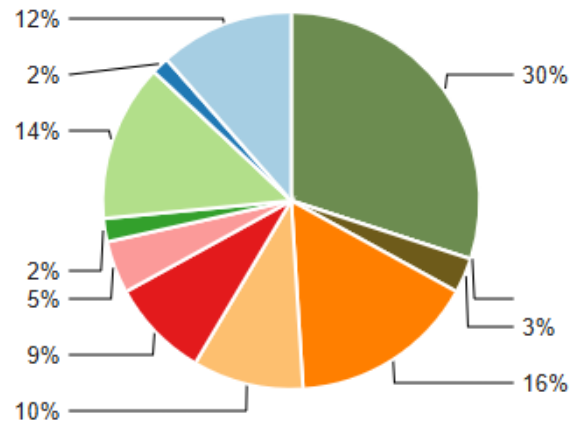
demonstration will give parents a reason to become regular customers. These types of events attract people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds as they are typically free to the public and enjoyable to people of all ages, genders and ethnic backgrounds.

The OCPM will work to source culturally diverse music groups and performances for their patrons. Their continued partnership with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Oneida County's Master Gardeners and SNAP-Ed departments will bring food demonstrations and garden expertise to the market. By establishing a dependable volunteer group with local colleges, activities like smoothie bikes and craft sessions can become regular events.

Applying these changes to OCPM will promote overall market and local food resiliency through increased and more regular attendance at the market from community members. By creating a space that is inclusive and welcoming to the communities that these markets serve, we create a space in which local food and farmers' markets are integrated as a fundamental and resilient aspect of Oneida County culture. Listening to our community to hear what wants, needs, desires, and interests they have is an important piece of the puzzle to establish a place for all.

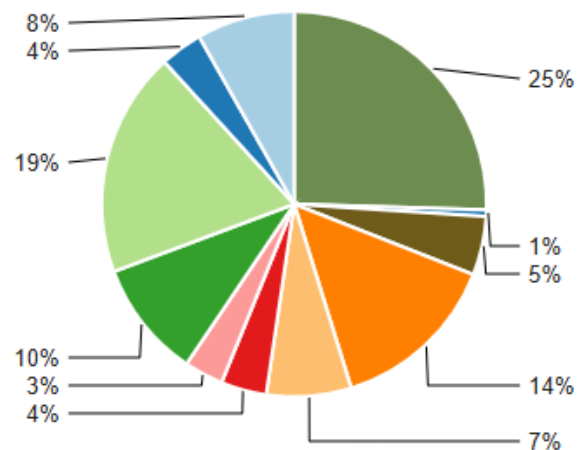
Figures and Photographs

What market are you attending today?



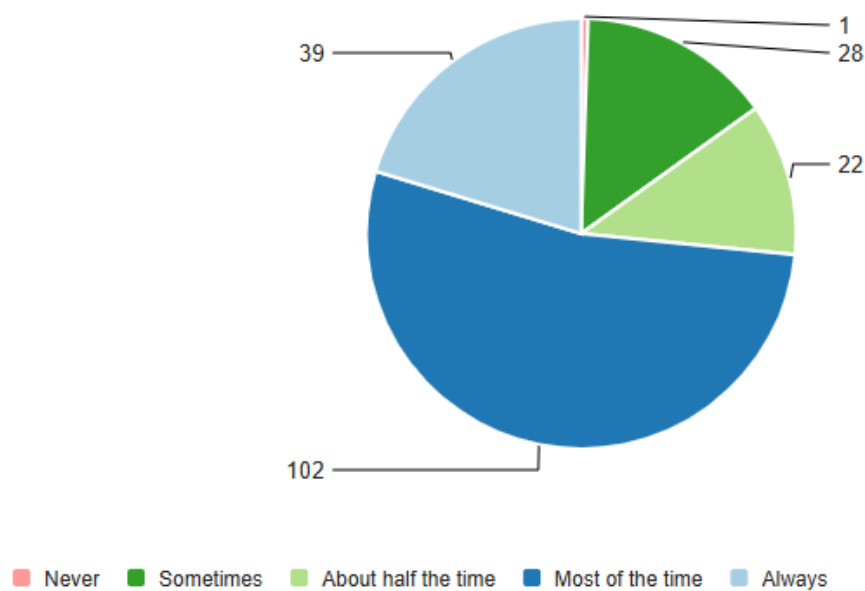
Oneida County Public Market (Union Train Station) Vernon Centor Utica (Chancellor Park) Whitesboro
Rome (Chestnut St) Vienna (Verona Beach) Oriskany New Hartford Clinton
Boonville (Elks Lodge) Boonville (Upper Erwin Park)

What county markets do you regularly attend?

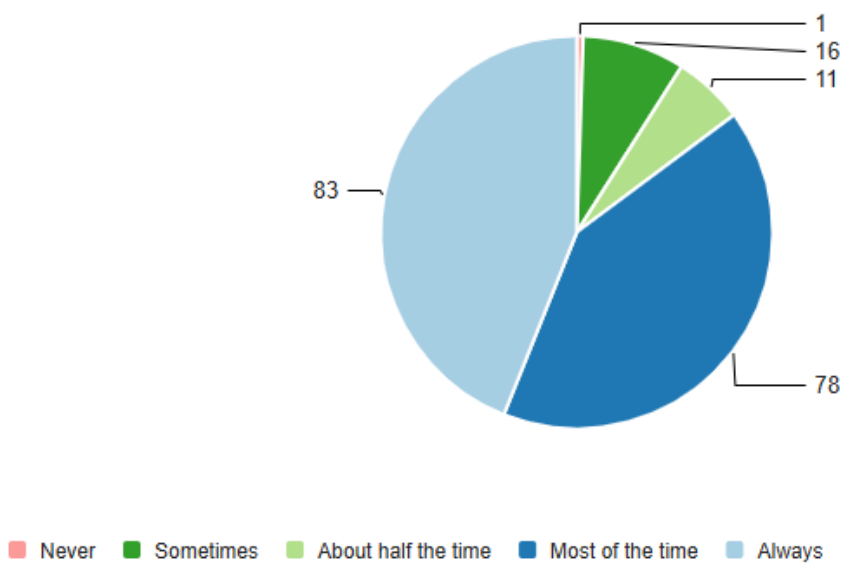


Oneida County Public Market (Union Train Station) Vernon Centor Utica (Chancellor Park)
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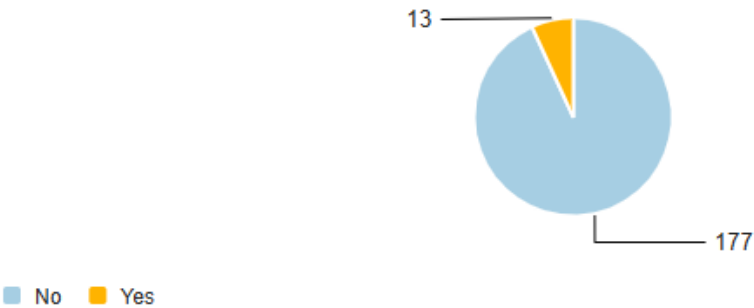
How often are you able to find the products you look for at the market?



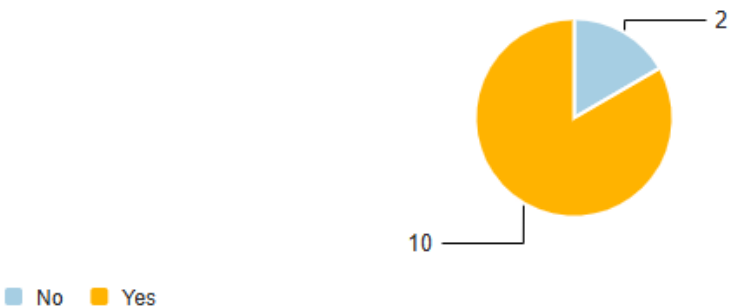
How often are you satisfied with the types of products available at the market?



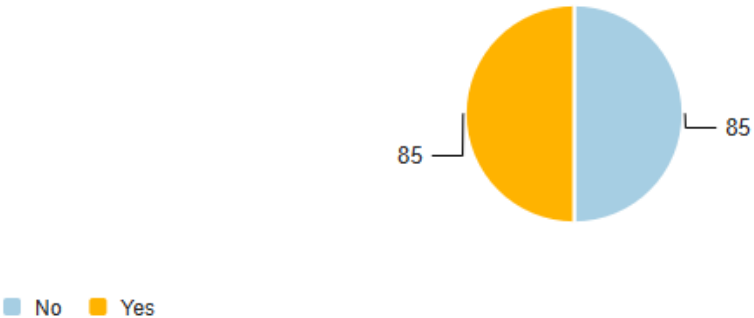
Do you rely on public transportation or ride shares to get you to/from the market?



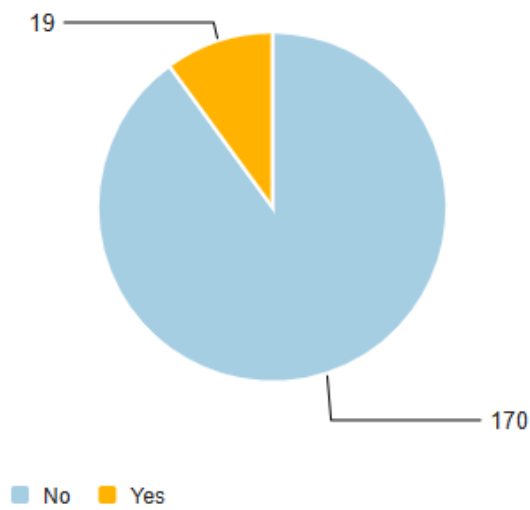
Do public transportation schedules influence your ability to come to the market and what markets you're able to visit?



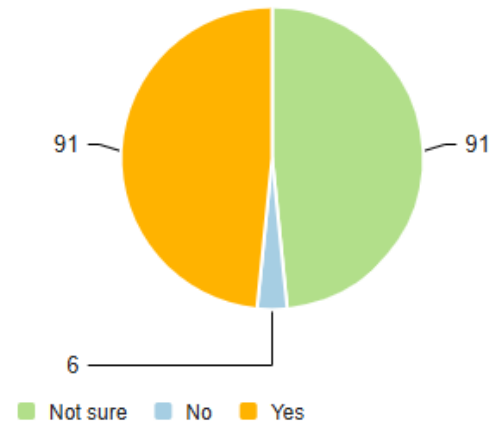
If you use a vehicle to transport yourself/others, does available parking influence your ability to visit the market?



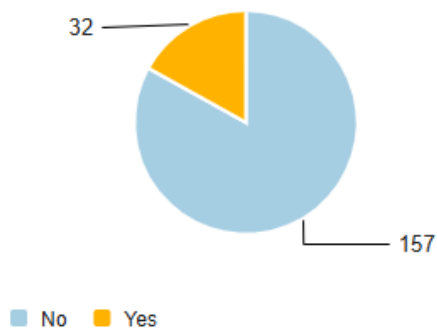
Do you use SNAP at the market?



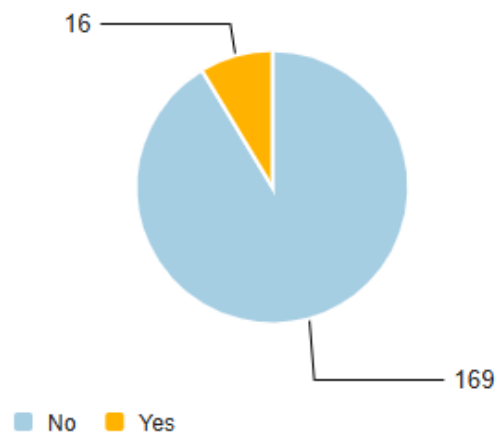
Do the markets you visit accept SNAP?



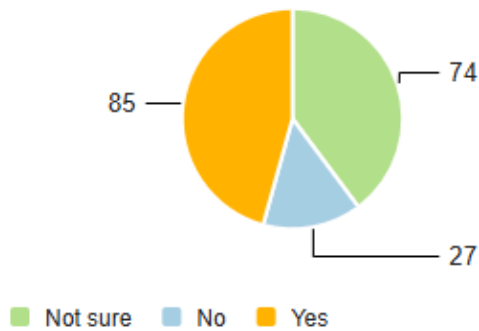
Does a market's participation in accepting SNAP influence your decision to visit?



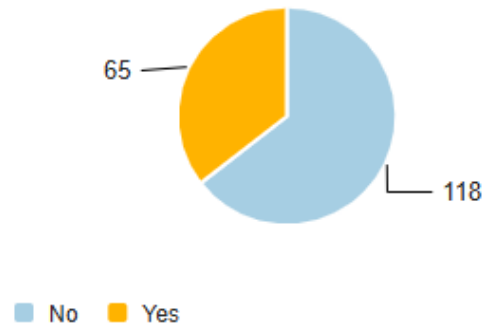
Do you only attend the markets that accept SNAP?



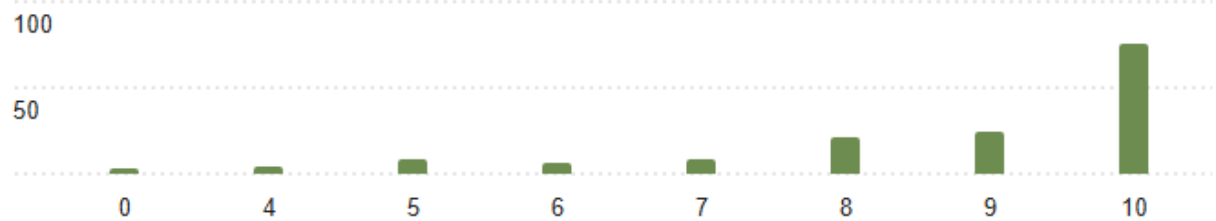
Does the market you attend have a customer service/information table?



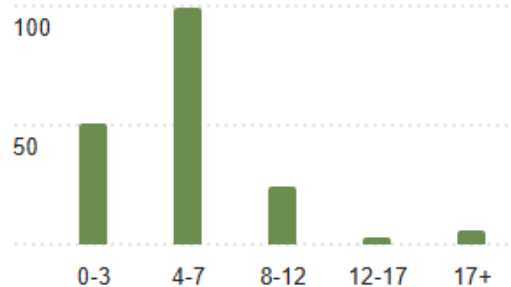
Have you ever needed to interact with market managers/workers while at the market?



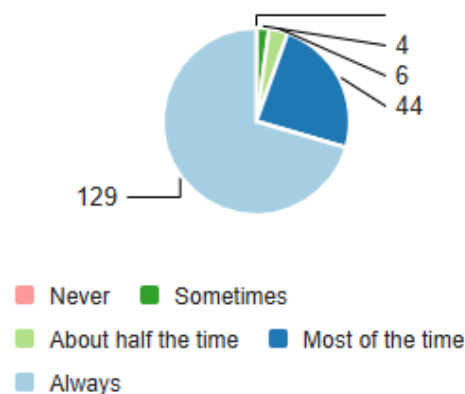
How would you rate customer service from the market managers/workers? (1 being horrible, 10 being fantastic)



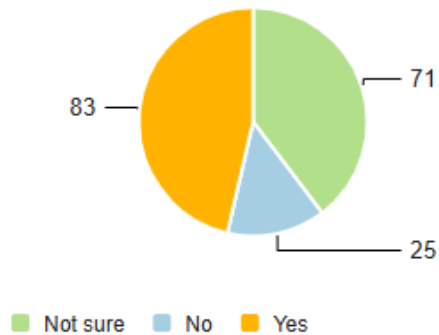
On average, how many vendors do you interact with at the market?



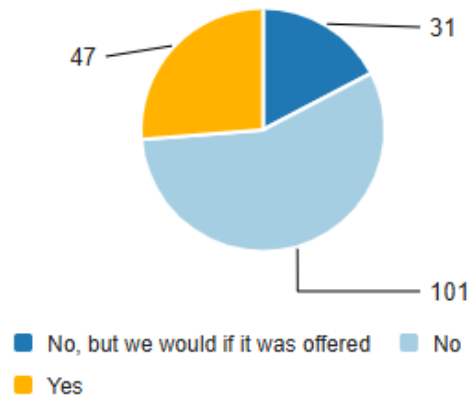
Do the vendors provide satisfactory customer service?



Does your market offer programming? (Kids activities, educational tables, SNAP-Ed demos, etc.)



Have you or your family participated in any programming at your market?



What types of programming do you wish your market offered?

music, kids events

cooking demonstration

SNAP-Ed demos, educational tables of interest to me, cultural/music/entertainment & if I don't have the opportunity to say it later, I wish/believe that ALL mkts should take SNAP.

nutritionist

more giveaways

information on cooking with products, information on where else to purchase from vendors

Kids

more music

not sure

Nutritional, especially geared for weight loss, offer whole foods

crafts for kids and adults

teaching kids how to grow and plant

baked goods

Kids activities demos

Markets seem to be focused on children would be nice to see something for elderly and or disabled

I love this market and I can't think of anything that is missing

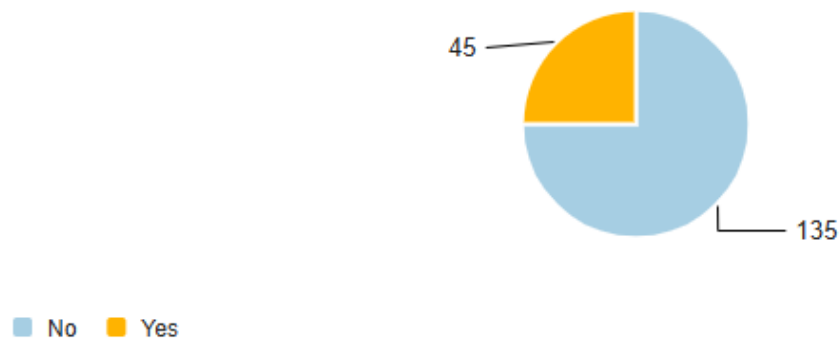
homegrown products being healthier options rather than store bought

demo/box showing plant/growth cycle of a crop

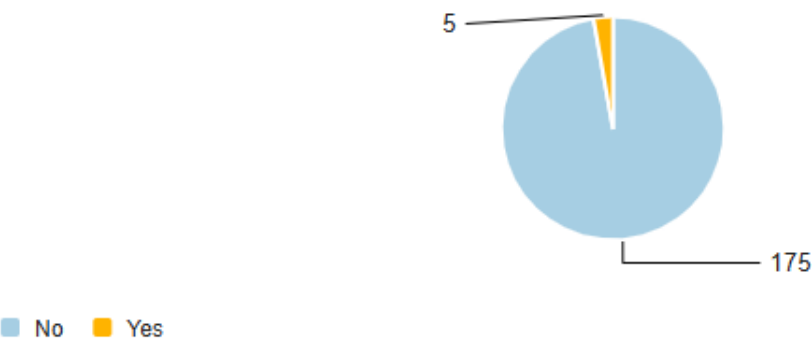
Inspirational music

Food trucks, veggies for sale, more vendors to be here. Very small in Oriskany :(

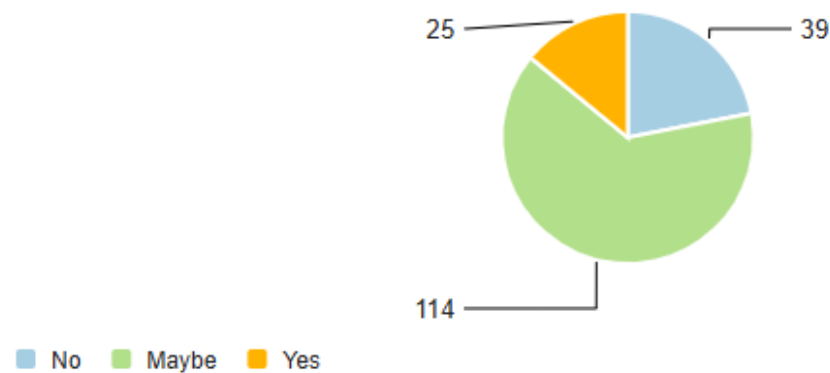
Have you heard of the E-commerce site through the Oneida County Public Market?



Have you ever used the E-commerce site to order in advance from OCPM vendors?



Would you use the OCPM E-commerce site in the future?





Surveying Table at the Boonville Harvest Market
August 30, 2024



Free Buttons and Stickers



Surveying Table at the Vienna Market
October 3, 2024



Surveying Table at the OCPM
September 7, 2024



Surveying Table at the Oriskany Market
August 28, 2024



Clinton Farmer's Market

Boonville Harvest Market





Rome Farmer's Market (Chestnut Street)

Whitesboro Farmer's Market





Boonville Farmer's Market (Upper Erwin Park)

Oriskany Farmer's Market





Vienna (Verona Beach) Farmer's Market

Oneida County Public Market



