

FMNZ Conference

Mt Pleasant, Christchurch

30/31 July 2018

“Community” was the word on everyone’s lips at the recent Farmers’ Market New Zealand conference held in the Mt Pleasant Community Centre, Christchurch.

As stallholder Cam Booker recounted, the carpark at the centre was the site of the first pop-up Farmers’ Market after the earthquake and the community came out in large numbers that day to meet each other, offer support and of course buy the fresh produce stallholders had brought. Community spirit was buoyed in a time that people really needed it and that Farmers’ Market has continued since then on Saturday mornings.

This wasn’t the only community supportive pop-up Farmers’ Market Cam was involved in. Vegetable grower from Sefton, North Canterbury, he had a wide range of vegetables in high demand in land-locked Kaikoura after their earthquake and so organised a boat to make a sea delivery to a very appreciative community there.

The two day FMNZ Conference was attended by market managers, committee members and stallholders from throughout New Zealand. Miriam Clark from Nelson FM said, “This was the best conference I have attended so far in terms of presentations, discussions and knowledge shared”.

Keynote speaker Kim Hewitt from Harvest Launceston Community Farmers’ Market in Tasmania kicked things off with an inspirational rundown on how their market operates, highlighting how important “Community” is in both their name and operation. The market was started by a newly arrived Kiwi Jenny Edis who wanted a social connection to her new community, and finding herself in a city surrounded by land growing produce that she couldn’t access, she followed the inspiration of NZ Farmers’ Markets and, with the help of others, created what is now a large successful market that is run by 3 managers and supported by a keen group of volunteers.

When the committee reviews stallholder applications they keep in mind that they don’t want to become a tourist destination, keeping the focus on locals needs. They follow the guidelines of an authentic FM with “food only” stallholders, keeping to a general mix of 60-70% produce, 20-30% added value stalls and 10-15% ready to eat. All value added and ready to eat stalls have to use at least 50% local produce and of course all stallholders are producers or directly involved in production.

Now nine years old the market boasts 100 member stallholders and an average of 4000 customers each summer market. Kim stressed that as well as all the benefits for stallholders the market has also created a positive social space for the community to come and connect each week.

The Conference included workshops by several market managers. Sarah Schwarz of the Waikato FM pointed out, “each market doesn’t need to reinvent the wheel- we can share experiences, ideas and strategies. We all have the same challenges and discussing solutions could mean that we progress much faster than we do on our own”. She explained the process she uses at her market to do weekly customer counts, the figures then being used to draw information on demographics. Using these numbers to base decisions on, their advertising budget has now been halved and is more targeted.

Reducing the use of plastic is an issue all communities are facing and Fiona McGeough from Matakana FM spoke on options she has come up with to help their policy of zero plastic waste. The market engaged Beyond the Bin consultancy company to help with disposal options and all their stallholders use a range of degradable products to present their goods in.

There tends to be a common misconception in the public that Farmers' Markets are too expensive. Lex Chalmers from Waikato University addressed this issue, presenting figures from the Waikato FM and 5 local supermarkets showing that primary produce (not specialty products) is cheaper at the FM in 65-70% of cases. Again the benefits of using information and facts to support market decisions were stressed along with discussing techniques for collating them. His research identified a \$6m contribution to the Waikato regional economy by the two local Farmers' Markets. Councils could well take note of that when looking at fostering new ones.

FMNZ advocates for Farmers' Market stallholders with the Ministry of Primary Industries (MPI) as we all cope with the changes the Food Bill brings. Chris Hewins represented MPI and had an upbeat message that the objective of the food safety regulation is to reduce the incidence of contamination, to work with businesses to come up with a system that works for everyone.

Of course whenever a bunch of Farmers' Markets advocates get together a popular subject is food. A highlight of the conference was the FMNZ Food Awards 2018 dinner, cooked by Kate McMilan from Valleyfare and highlighting some of the award winning produce. Superbly presented, the world class dinner impressed this group of foodies with the range of high class NZ food ranging from raw milk cheeses, local vegetables, honey, sourdough breads to Portuguese custards.

Jono Walker of Hamilton provided some light relief to all the listening workshops as he brought along some of his free-range pork mince and sausage making equipment for the attendees to try their communal skills out following 4 of his tasty recipes. Barbequed sausages then joined the lunch menu that day and more than one attendee went home with a new sausage press.

Inspiration and full of new ideas was the overall mood as the attendees returned to their regions. Lyn Paul of Tauranga Farmers' Market enthused, "what a good platform for discussion, sharing of ideas and meeting others experiencing the same battles." "Going home with new directions to head" said Jennie Crum of the Marlborough FM. Discussions were had on what could be addressed at next year's conference including some mentoring sessions on governance, how to put together a strategic plan as well as marketing help for stallholders. Everyone strongly recommended other markets to attend, recognising that the organisation gets strength from its members.

Jennie Crum
Marlborough FM
August 2018

Quotes

Miriam Clark (Nelson FM)

This was the best conference I have attended so far in terms of presentations, discussions and knowledge shared. I find FMNZ conference really valuable for networking, and learning more about what other markets do which helps me evaluate our systems and the conference presentations are very thought provoking.

Sarah Schwarz(Waikato FM)

The main thing I got out of the conference was the feeling that each market doesn't need to reinvent the wheel - we can share experiences, ideas and strategies. We all have the same challenges and discussing solutions could mean that we progress much faster than we do on our own.

Lyn Paul (Tauranga FM)

Discussions either reinforced your market was going okay, and/but gave ideas of how processes could be introduced/improved.

Over all a good platform for discussion, sharing of ideas and meeting others experiencing the same battles.

Sausage idea was such a great team builder.

Fiona McGeough (Matakana FM)

I found this years conference incredibly helpful in understanding how the MPI food control plan effects my stall holders. Thanks FMNZ

Jennie Crum (Marlborough FM)

It was like an injection of enthusiasm for FM's all over again, so good hearing and seeing what other markets do and come home armed with new ideas to try.