

An Ethnographic Study of an Urban Periodic Marketplace: Lessons from the Midville Farmers' Market

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An ethnography of a midwestern farmers' market captures patterns of farmer/vendor behaviors and buyer-seller interactions. We used a variety of methods and media to produce a thick description of this periodic urban marketplace and to reveal a series of successful marketing practices. The paper uses an extended case study format as a baseline for interpreting the role of retail institutions in the social construction of community.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we provide an ethnographic account of a neglected but resilient form of direct marketing: the urban farmers' market. In 1988, consumers spent something less than \$2 billion on food bought directly from farmers. Such direct marketing is accounting for an increasing share of U.S. agricultural sales and is altering conventions in the food marketing industry (Mueller and Edmondson 1988). The process of "desocialization"—that is, the elimination of opportunities for humane interpersonal encounters in the marketplace—is accelerating in retail settings in general, and in supermarkets in particular (Sommer, Herrick, and Sommer 1981).

As an alternative, the resurgence of “the new village markets” (Joy 1978) are attracting both consumers and farmers alike. Both economics and “immediacy” (Sherry 1990a) contribute to the growing popularity of the farmers’ market. We attempt to account for the appeal of this form of direct marketing and distill strategies for traditional retailers by examining some of the dynamics of a midwestern American farmers’ market.

The object of our study is nestled uncomfortably between the horns of agrarian myth and contemporary reality. The farmer and the family farm have become the center of some attention. They embody root cultural metaphors inviting us to compare our urban existence with themes edenic, idyllic, and pastoral. Nature versus culture is contested in their images. Values of individual and family initiative are enshrined there as well. The lure of primitivity, of natural religion, and of soon-to-vanish cultural propriety is evoked in their names. Despite (or perhaps because of) the hallowed place they are accorded in contemporary consumer culture, the farmer and family farm may be on our endangered institutions list. The erosion of farm culture along with farmland that has attended ideological change and technological advance has long been accepted as the price of progress. Still, there is a grassroots level preservation drive afoot, and this populism is evinced in full bloom in the farmers’ market. It is both the site and source of local *communitas*, that mode of relatedness that transcends formal social bonds.

Ethnographers have helped to document the contemporary farm crisis, and have explored policy issues to reduce problems (Chibnik 1987). The farmers’ market, however, has not been examined as a potentially corrective mechanism. Poet and farmer Wendell Berry (1987) has identified six agricultural fallacies that provide context for our study of the Midville Market: 1) that agriculture may be understood and dealt with as an industry; 2) that a sound agricultural economy can be based on an export market; 3) that the “free market” can preserve agriculture; 4) that productivity is a sufficient standard of production; 5) that there are too many farmers; and 6) that hard labor is bad. Our informants describe for us an agribusiness of human scale and a market mechanism with both satisfying and frustrating functions outside the economic domain. By examining the business styles of farmer-vendors, exploring their interactions with urban consumers, and recording the reactions of customers to such direct marketing, we have tried to portray the farmers’ market as a holistic community forum. In this paper we offer an encapsulated description of the workings of a farmers’ market, include an interpretation of its workings, and suggest a series of alternative strategies applicable to retailing in general.

An ethnographic study of a modern periodic marketplace presents the

opportunity to view a conventional setting holistically and from a novel perspective. We present a description of the Midville Farmers' Market with the goal of understanding and abstracting activities within this lively market setting. We offer interpretations of marketing phenomena to integrate our findings with the extant literature and to offer fresh and substantive insights into buyer-seller dynamics and the role of retailers and accompanying institutions.

THE LITERATURE

While the expansive literature (Bromley 1977, 1979) on periodic markets is devoted largely to non-Western contexts and economic analyses, the insights from economic anthropology have begun a sustained diffusion into marketing and consumer research (Arnould 1989; Sherry 1987a, 1990a, 1990b; Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988). Plattner (1989) provides a useful introduction to conventional social scientific analyses of traditional periodic markets, and focuses in particular on the elements of exchange that comprise the customary parameters of interest: goods, transactions, and actors. The limitations of the views from economic anthropology have also been explored (Sherry 1989). The neglect of extraeconomic market-place behavior, the privileging of externality over embeddedness, and the artificial separation of informal from formal activity in retail analyses are among the criticisms levelled at researchers of contemporary periodic markets. More humanistic treatments (Crace 1992) have begun to rectify the flatness of conventional accounts. Our ethnography seeks to contribute to this rectifying trend. By limiting our focus to a single form of periodic marketplace in the U.S.—the urban farmers' market—we have tried to provide some of the depth of description and analysis that will help make cross-forms comparison of contemporary periodic marketplaces more productive.

There are few rigorous studies of farmers' markets. Most of the existing work is set in the context of developing countries. The scant literature on the topic falls into seven major categories: historical overviews (Lord 1975, Tweeten 1984), typological distinctions (Kada 1980), cross-market surveys (Dewar and Watson 1990, Goldman 1973), comparisons against supermarkets in price (Sommer, Wing, and Aitkens 1980), quality (Sommer, Knight, and Sommer 1979; Sommer, Stumpf, and Bennett 1982) and consumption patterns (Fjeld and Sommer 1982), "mini-case" profiles and illustrations (Brucato 1948, Demuth and Demuth 1982), timid public policy speculation (Paarlberg 1980; Shakow 1981; Knutson, Penn, and Boehm 1983; Tyburczy and Sommer 1983), and "how to" or advice

manuals (Friedlander 1976). An occasional conference proceedings volume (Courter 1978, 1979) pulls many of the categories together under a common cover.

Several surveys of why people shop at farmers' markets replicate the same list of preferences. "Freshness" or "fresher produce" is the attribute that consistently ranked most important by consumers (Brooker and Taylor 1977; Roy, Leary, and Law 1977; Archer 1978). Sommer and Wing (1980) term this "product quality." Sociability and price rank second and third respectively. Sommer, Herrick, and Sommer (1981) found more social interaction per visit at farmers' markets than in supermarkets located in the same cities.

The ethnographic record of such markets is thin. The best methodological parallel to our study is that of the Soulard Market (Plattner 1982, 1983, 1984; Eckstein and Plattner 1978), although this site differs significantly from our focal market in both scale and formality. Soulard is open year around (thus not a periodic market), and significant wholesaling and reselling take place within the permanent brick structure that houses its 283 booths. Kerim's (1981) study of a recently founded farmers' market in Macomb, Illinois, and Wagner's (1978) study of a farmers' market in Carbondale, Illinois, parallel the present investigation in terms of research site. The latter study is primarily an economic impact assessment; the former study attempts a more comprehensive view of the market, but relies primarily on survey data and literature review in its account. Neither of these authors employs the perspectives of marketing or consumer research in their analysis, and neither presents a holistic evaluation of the farmers' market. We attempt a more humanistic description in the following pages.

Farmers' markets belong to a class of marketplaces experienced by consumers in a very particular way. The structure of such markets unfolds along the dimension of a formal-informal dialectic, and the function along that of an economic-festive dialectic. According to Sherry (1990a, 17) such markets exhibit great semiotic intensity: that is, "the counterpoised dimensions of the model [of marketplace structure and function] are brought into such intimate association and are condensed so tightly that the resulting tension is palpable to participants and seems to energize them as well." Our investigation is an extension of this work on the dynamics of periodic marketplaces. Using Sherry's (1990a) framework, the dialectical tension of farmers' markets would not be as great as that of the swapmeets and flea markets of recent interest to consumer researchers (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Sherry 1990a, 1990b), but it is far greater than that of such marketplaces as retail shops, garage sales, fairs, and theme parks

studied to date. The appeal of farmers' markets arises in large measure in reaction to some of the so-called "critical developments" in retailing which accelerated in the 1980s: the rise of power retailers, the increasing polarity of retailing, the increasing power of retailers, the growing importance of convenience, the increased focus on price legitimacy, and the rise of relationship management (Stern and El-Ansary 1992, 58-91). The farmers' market is a servicescape (Bitner 1992) that is virtually nativistic in its civic impact. Consumers return figuratively and literally to their roots. By describing and interpreting the dynamics of its dialectical intensity, we will differentiate farmers' markets from marketplaces commonly studied and explore some implications for reinvigorating less direct forms of marketing.

METHOD

Our methodology is that of an ethnography employing an interpretive paradigm and multiple data collection processes. At the time of this writing, ethnography has diffused fairly widely through the literature of consumer research (Sherry 1991), and has begun to penetrate the retailing literature (McGrath 1989; Prus 1989a, 1989b; Sherry 1988, 1990b; Sherry and McGrath 1989; Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1992, 1993). The use of ethnography in marketing research proper has been advocated by Sherry (1987a), who has catalogued some of the managerial purposes it has recently served (Sherry 1992). Because methodological tutorials are widely available to marketing researchers (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; McCracken 1988; Sherry 1987a, 1990a; Wallendorf and Belk 1989), we have not reviewed epistemology in this article. Rather, we have described the specific techniques employed in this study.

A bi-gender team approach (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989) was adopted for this study. Since the vendor group was predominantly male and shoppers predominantly female, interactions with both male and female researchers reduced many interaction biases. Two of the researchers concentrated upon documenting market activities each Saturday during the nineteen-week selling season of the Midville Farmers' Market. The third member of the research team made periodic visits to the site where he augmented this documentation. He debriefed and directed the principal investigators between market sessions, and audited the research process (Lincoln and Guba 1985). He also facilitated discussion in the hermeneutic circle (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989, 1991) that led to the jointly negotiated interpretation of marketplace behavior reported in this article.

The market officially operated between 7 am and 2 pm, and researchers documented activities at the site between 5 am and 3 pm. While present at the market, the researchers made written and audio-taped notes of observations and interviews that were later elaborated into field notes, transcripts, and journal entries. In turn, we shared these documents and drafts of our analyses with several informants as member checks. No external auditor was enlisted. Given the disputed utility of these procedures (Sherry 1990a, 1990b, 1991), the third investigator structured his involvement to function as an external auditor, and used his "supervisory" status to engage informants and elicit their evaluations of the progress of the field project. The researchers engaged in participant observation from several perspectives by shopping at and working in vendor booths. Customers and vendors were interviewed using both directive and nondirective formats. Shopping with customers and selling with vendors proved particularly useful methods of interviewing. We developed and maintained relationships with key informants who were regular vendors, customers, and city representatives at the market. Local formal sector retailers were interviewed as well. Weekly fieldnotes were written, which in combination with reflective journal entries and analytic photo logs, comprise the text archive of this study. In addition, events were recorded by systematically photographing each market and by the occasional use of video recording.

Included in the data archive are over one thousand photographs, made at the rate of approximately 60 per week over the course of the nineteen-week study. The use of photographs and inventories in conjunction with field notes has been discussed in detail by Heisley and Levy (1991) and Heisley, McGrath, and Sherry (1991). In our field investigation, we used photographs both as a projective vehicle for autodiving individual informants and as an archival source for enriching the ethnographers' fieldnotes. Simultaneous with the fieldwork, a literature review of alternative markets in general and farmers' markets in particular was undertaken. In addition, the historical development of this market was investigated through interviews with early participants and analysis of an archive of the Midville Farmers' Market preserved at the local historical society.

This research is characterized both by its emergent research design and on-going negotiated roles of the participants in the research partnership (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1988; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989, 1991). Initially, the two principal investigators attempted to assume specialized roles of photographer and notetaker and each worked independently within the market. The separation of roles quickly proved unsatisfactory, as it yielded an incomplete account of the market day. In addition, we found that each photograph demanded an accompanying elaborative

text; the photographer needed to produce documentation. Subsequent to the third market, all researchers wrote fieldnotes and, although one did the majority of the photography, this function was shared by the other team members. The principal investigators also evolved a pattern to their market visits, so that each week some time was spent in solitary observation, while other time was allocated to working as a team. New data sources were pursued as their importance was hypothesized to be relevant. Beginning with the fourth market, the researchers kept a weekly inventory of the assortment and price of produce available at each booth. Corresponding prices of these items at the local grocery stores were gathered from local newspapers. Each of the analysts “proposed, elaborated, defended, and negotiated interpretations, bringing a range of perspectives to the enterprise” (Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1992), in the “close reading” tradition of content analysis advocated by postmodern consumer researchers (Levy 1981; Sherry 1984; Sherry and Camargo 1987; Stern 1989). Our goal was to develop a thick description (Geertz 1973) of marketplace behaviors, to interpret the significance of these behaviors in sociocultural perspective and to assess the managerial relevance of our findings. In this article, we focus our description on the vendors’ roles and strategies in the market. Every vendor in the Midville Market participated in this field study. Each was extensively interviewed and photographed over time. Many of the vendors became key informants and reacted to our themes, interpretations, and manuscripts.

THE ETHNOGRAPHY: THE MIDVILLE FARMERS’ MARKET

Following is an encapsulated ethnography of marketplace behavior. For the presentation, we elaborated upon the loose framework of relevant elements suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Pseudonyms are employed throughout the account and the ethnographic present tense is used by convention.

The Setting

Midville is a suburban city of 70,000 residents of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, varied occupational pursuits, and a broad range of socio-economic strata. This small city has sustained a stable racial mix since Civil War times. The housing stock reflects the social stratification, with working class people (most often of particular ethnic stock) living in bungalows which they own and often share with extended family members, and the upper-middle class people residing in impressively detailed and historically significant houses. Lower-middle class people tend to live

in small and large apartment buildings and condominium structures clustered near the central business section. A resident student population associated with two private universities and several small colleges adds to the diversity of the population mix, but declines substantially during the summer months.

The farmers' market takes place along an otherwise undistinguished two-block long section of Thompson Street in the northern part of the downtown area of this city. The street is paved with a curb on the east side and parking abutments and raised train tracks on the west. To the east is more of the downtown area with many office buildings, shops and restaurants. Immediately adjacent to the market at the north end is a parking lot associated with a large new office building. Parking in this lot normally requires a fee or key card, but on Saturday mornings the gates are open. Few customers initially use the new lot, and most search for parking to the south of the market site. Each Saturday morning between late June and early November farmers set up shop on forty discrete and clearly numbered twenty-foot spaces previously painted on the pavement by city workers.

This year's market site represents a location change from the previous several seasons. The market opens with complaints and grumblings, as both customers and vendors criticize the new locale, the size and location of the selling spaces, and their perception of inadequate parking. The new site is less than one city block from the original location, but the shift to the east side of a major railroad viaduct from the west side generates anxiety and negativity. Several consumers complain that they have difficulty finding the market, and vendors fret about whether customers will locate both the new site and their new locations within the market. The set up and functioning of the opening day of the market are detailed by the authors in previous work (Heisley, McGrath, and Sherry 1981).

This outdoor setting has no natural shelter, and thus the weather predominates conversation, atmospherics, and mood. The following fieldnote entries are a sampling of the role of weather in the market experience:

Arrival time 8:30 am. It is very hot and humid, currently 85 degrees, with temps expected in the 90's today. The humidity is unbelievable. I am melting.

Arrive at the market at 9:45, when the sky opens with rain. There are three distinct downpours. The first drives people under the big umbrellas of the vendors. Many stand under these for about 15 minutes until there is a let up in the torrents of rain. Most customers leave as the rain lets up slightly. . . . They [the vendors] have little to do, and seem to welcome the attention and conversation. The heavy rain prevents those who

want to leave from packing up. So we stand in the roar of the pelting rain and talk.

The weather at 7:30 am, the time I arrive, is bleak. It is 40 degrees and raining, and a brisk north wind is blowing the rain almost horizontally down the length of the street. . . . Several vendors express surprise to see me on such an unsavory day.

It's overcast, clearing up a bit, still drizzling, a miserable day.

Background and History of the Midville Market

The Midville Farmers' Market is in its tenth year. It was the conception and production of five determined female residents who researched the feasibility of such a market for Midville. Their final report to the city reflects both their initial optimism and their thoughtful investigation:

In summary, those contacted were extremely enthusiastic about their markets. People in great numbers are attracted to farmers' markets because of the freshness of the produce and the special color and camaraderie typical of open-air markets in all corners of the world. . . . In all of the above communities the markets are orderly and well-managed with special emphasis placed on observing the city ordinances and market regulations. (Midville Historical Archives)

The founding mothers based the Midville Market on that in another midwestern city of similar size and population. This model market, which simply provided a place and time for its vendors to meet, had a fifty year history of successful functioning and a low level of infrastructure in comparison to many outdoor markets (Dewar and Watson 1990). The committee drafted a proposal to the City of Midville suggesting a definition of the market, an organizational structure involving city control, alternative sites, and a self-supporting budget for the undertaking. Projected expenses were to equal annual fees collected from vendors. An ordinance was passed to officially establish a Farmers' Market, hire a Market Master for supervision and control, set a fee and fine structure for vendors, outline general regulations for vendors and consumers, and create a citizens' Farmers' Market Commission to annually review the functioning of the market and recommend changes. The city exercises complete authority over the market, and technically "invites" and "uninvites" vendors to participate. Authority during the selling hours is vested in the Market Master, an off-duty Midville policeman, who is the single paid employee and hired by the city.

The protocol of this farmers' market is technically distinguished as a greenmarket (McPhee 1978). Sellers are growers and there are no wholesalers or resellers allowed. Archival documents record that

Products for sale at the market were limited to fresh fruits and vegetables, edible grains, nuts and berries, apiary products, maple sugars, syrups, eggs, live plants, trees, shrubs and cut flowers. These were to be sold only by the grower or producer, members of his family, or by persons in his employ. (Friedlander 1976)

The initial recruitment of farmers proved to be both the largest chore and the greatest challenge to staging the fledgling market (Lublin 1975). Again, the archives are instructive:

We didn't personally know any farmers, so we asked for help from the Agricultural Extension offices. They gave us the names of the County Ag Extension directors who are in touch with farmers through bulletins, newsletters and radio programs dealing with farm news. (Friedlander 1976)

After nine farmers signed on for the initial market, the founding mothers worried about whether customers would appear. They did, "in droves with umbrellas and shopping bags and bought everything in sight" (Friedlander 1976). The first year ended with customers and farmers anticipating the second summer:

Signs on trucks said "See you next year," and some customers were busily writing down the country addresses of farmers whom they'd come to know and count on for good-quality produce. One farmer with an especially large following even came back a few more Saturdays, parking his truck on a neighborhood side street. (Friedlander 1976)

The Farmers at their Booths

Most vendors attend the market each Saturday, and by virtue of their selling role and fixed location, they become the locus of market activity and interest. They are visually distinguishable from customers by their ruddy, sun-bronzed faces and arms, untrimmed hair, and attire of jeans, t-shirts or flannel shirts, straw or baseball hats, and boots. They, whether consciously or not, embody their customers' stereotype of "the farmer." Many have the lanky, lean body-types of runners and even those who are overweight tend to be quite muscular. By virtue of their stationary location

within the market setting and their finite number, tracking their activities and developing relationships with them became a major research focus.

Each booth is arranged and managed independently and distinctively. The following vignettes illustrate the diversity that marks each booth.

- *There is a Greek man with his light-skinned blond wife. The oldest boy seems about 12 and is very shy of the camera; he is dark. The next two boys are around eight and ten . . . they sell glads and other cut flowers, but their specialty is making bouquets for the customers. He has a rap, a hard work rap. "Look at my split fingers, I work hard, but it is good work, up at 3:00 . . ." Their children help and they seem to be always very busy at their booth. His hard work rap never includes the market. I ask him, Isn't this hard work too? He says no, this is the "show," this is talking to people.*
- *Alfred and Marguerite Vern . . . run a stall from the back of a van whose side panel announces they sell the "world's greatest pop-corn." Alfred, who has a heart condition, is a farmer turned salesperson turned entrepreneur. She is a retired medical technician. They both enjoy working for themselves, despite the long hours and physical toll they log. They got up this morning at 3:00 am to make the trip from [home]. Marguerite has difficulty figuring change, so Alfred assists her. Customers also assist her in the figuring, for which she is grateful ("Thanks. It's always helpful"). The couple uses an ancient adding machine for multiple item purchases. Customers ask numerous questions about various products on the table; Marguerite and Alfred explain each item thoughtfully and carefully, seeming to enjoy the interaction every bit as much as the sale. Each "takes care" of the other, emotionally and physically. They spell each other during the morning of sales. She defers to him during our conversation, often working the stand to permit Alfred to continue talking. To me he confides, "It's good for her to work up front here." He calls his refried soybeans "panthers" because of their color ("I call 'em Black Panthers around white people").*
- *Roger Sterm sells produce through farmers' markets, directly to supermarkets, and through commission houses. The work, effort, and cost increases as you sell up this hierarchy. Roger estimates at least 50% of his business is done through farmers' markets. He says that Midville is "always good; it's always crowded." He speculates that since it's the oldest in the area, it's gotten the best reputation. Midville has a diverse, "liberal" population, so consumers here are likely to be experimental in their shopping patterns. Last year Roger*

experimented with white eggplant. . . . It sold well in Midville because there is an Egyptian population here. . . . Midville residents are willing to experiment and learn. Roger maintains that "Some people come with a chip on their shoulder. Your price is too high. Your stuff is dirty. I told one guy (in response to the "dirty" comment), yeah, I'm trying something new this year. I'm growing it in the ground." Roger has fixed prices for all his produce, and claims that he won't bargain. He views bargaining as both a hassle and as an injustice to early customers who pay full price. He hears lots of bargaining levers: "[They say] you're going to have to take it home anyway." To this he responds, "That's right, I'll take it home."

The structural distinction between "inside" versus "outside" (Sherry 1990a; Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988) emerges at the smaller-scale Midville Market. Geography delineates vendors who are central from those who are peripheral, with longstanding vendors who attend weekly being assigned selling areas near the middle of the market, while sporadic and new attendees are relegated to the two ends of the strip. Larger more established vendors near the center also tend to create an "inside" to their outdoor stalls by constructing canvas covered aluminum lean-to type booths, using a series of large umbrellas to provide both shelter and delineation, or configuring the booths to resemble a traditional retail setting. One notable example is a horseshoe shaped stand with a lettered invitation near the "outside" to "Walk On In."

A Typology of Vendors

A number of variables such as expertise, breadth of assortment, kinship roles, gender, ethnicity and longevity at the market emerge as significant descriptors used by customers, researchers, and the sellers themselves to distinguish and delineate vendors. Although each vendor is unique, limited aggregation is appropriate and useful. The following is an etic classification of seller types that incorporates these variables.

The Average Joe. With full recognition that the average vendor at this market is fictitious, we construct an ideal type to serve as an anchor with which to contrast other types. This "average" seller is a white midwestern male in his late forties or early fifties. He heads a family enterprise and is surrounded by several generations of male and female kin both at the market and on the farm. He has participated in the Midville market for half a decade or longer and is in attendance at almost all of the market sessions. He tends to be conservative, but quiet with his views, and his

general outlook is cautious and somewhat pessimistic, as a field note excerpt suggests.

Tom [The Market Master] comments, "These farmers are always complaining about something, even when everything is going well."

These modal vendors carefully track their sales and employ a form of folk regression to predict sales and the demand structure on particular weeks of the summer. They prefer to overstock rather than to sell out early, with any excess recycled to other markets, sold at home-based farmstands, fed to cattle, or plowed under as fertilizer for future crops.

The Bumbling Novice. These are inexperienced vendors who have recently begun to attend the market. Representative of this group is the Ericson family, two thirty-year-old school teachers who hope to supplement their income by growing and selling perennial plants from their newly purchased farm. Their plants are notably smaller than those of competitors. Their assortment is narrow and not synchronized with the gardening season, as perennials are typically planted young and in early spring to fully take advantage of the abbreviated Midwestern growing season. One vendor rationalizes her production strategy:

She [Mrs. Ericson] tells me that people like to buy what's blooming. She says she worked at a greenhouse for several years and she knows that people look for blooms.

Their behavior is sometimes painful to observe. They have neither booth nor umbrella to protect themselves or their plants from the heat and sun. Their plants quickly wilt, and they explain that the astilbes cannot handle the sun. In the absence of shade, the adults wear dark sunglasses, impeding eye contact critical to developing customer relationships. A field note excerpt records how, on one 90 degree day, the unrelenting cries of their nine-month-old son, which can be heard throughout the market, visibly upset spectators who in turn avoid the booth.

The [Ericson's] infant was crying in the back of the truck. He had very red cheeks from the heat, and as he tried to stand up, he would take hold of the edge of the tail gate (which was up), burn his hands, and cry harder.

Two weeks later, we learned how a neighboring vendor had taken action to aid their other child who was suffering from the heat.

Jens [Ericson] told me that he left his little girl at home because two weeks ago she got sick because of the heat. He

talked about how fair and sensitive she was to the sun and heat. He said that at the market two weeks ago she had gotten sick and red and that Houston [Greenwall] had brought down some ice water that they had and that they wrapped her up in something and kept it wet with the water to get her cooled down.

The young father says the family is growing 500 mums for sale in the fall, “if there are any left, because we forgot to water before we came today.”

A variation of the **Bumbling Novice** is the **Hobby Vendor**, exemplified by the Verns and the Boormans. The Verns, mentioned in an earlier vignette, are an elderly retired couple who enjoy open air markets because they like to talk with people. He claims to like to “josh and jaw with people.” He tries to get people to talk about themselves and engage them in interactions. When they do not feel up to it or they have a conflicting engagement (usually a church revival), they skip attendance at the market. One ethnographer observes:

You get that relationship management and bonding that Leavitt talks about going on [here. He] goes ahead and closes the sale based on the relationship that he forges with these people. He’s got lots of regular customers. As I sit here at the booth, any number of regular customers have come by this morning looking for particular items or even if they don’t stop to buy, they stop to literally ‘josh and jaw’ with Alfred and Marguerite.

The Boormans are former residents of Midville who retired and bought a farm. They joke that such a purchase is a metaphor for death. The purchase was almost on impulse, a spontaneous suicide. They decided to “go rural” and dropped into a real estate office in Indiana, looked at farm property, and purchased a farm. Mrs. Boorman describes the family as “beginners” who have no marketing technique. A fieldnote excerpt states:

They are essentially making it up as they go along. They’re learning on the job. [Mrs. Boorman] claims that she enjoys talking with people and just being outside . . . that’s the principal benefit to her, being in an outdoor market.

The Entrepreneurial Botanist. John Redmand serves as an example of this type, as he grows the widest variety of vegetables available at this market, both within and across categories. He voices curiosity to the research team as to how many varieties of vegetables are represented at the market, and he claims with some degree of pride that he grows over 200 varieties. He differentiates multiple varieties of each vegetable. For exam-

ple, he displays wooden boxes of conventional cucumbers aside a twisted oriental variety and a third, thinner and lighter in color and labeled "burpless." His booth offers the closest approximation to one-stop shopping available at the market. He offers multiple varieties of seasonal vegetables (7 types of squash), innovative products (white acorn squash), rare and relatively expensive products (scallions, fresh herbs, hot peppers), as well as staple items (carrots, green peppers, apples) while the growing season allows. He expresses interest in growing new varieties from a horticultural perspective rather than with an entrepreneurial spirit. At periods of peak activity in the marketplace, he will always stop to talk to a customer or researcher who inquires, "What do you have that is new and different today?"

The Risk Taker. This is a modified "Young Turk," the limits of his rebelliousness being tempered by virtue of being part of a family business. Daryl Greenwall, the 40-year-old son who exercises managerial authority over a multi-generational family orchard, exemplifies this category. Last year he experimented with a new product, mini-pumpkins, by planting the product in a ten acre field. His bounty was met with enthusiastic acceptance in both his retail and wholesale markets and notably among florists. This year he has planted 200 acres. Other clan members think he is making a serious mistake and predict the demise of the family business. They do not discuss Daryl's gamble outside the circle of the family until the fall harvest, when mini-pumpkins are selling vigorously at the market as well as across the nation. The news of the Greenwall success circulates among the vendors when Daryl buys blooming lilies from an established plant merchant as gifts for "the girls" at the farm who have been packing the pumpkins for shipment by semi-trailer to the east and west coasts. Daryl's heroics and the family's relief are memorialized in a quilt given to his newlywed son and daughter-in-law at their November wedding. The quilt is a family wedding tradition which incorporates the handiwork of the female kin. At its center is an embroidered square which proclaims, "Thank God For Mini-Pumpkins."

The Middle-Aged Matriarch. A female may come to supervise an enterprise by virtue of widowhood, dominance over a mate, or a family agreement to a division of labor wherein each spouse regularly attends different markets. Mrs. Wrenn is a stalwart widow who continues the business of family farming with her younger son, now in his late-twenties and a seller of print media space, who works with her at the Saturday market. Kathy Clements and Maggie McGee represent their respective family farms at the Midville Market while male family members attend other area markets. Hannah Lund is a formidable matriarch in the presence

of her quiet and introverted husband. Such booths parallel female retail enterprises such as gift shops in that workers in such booths are predominantly female. The middle-aged, caucasian matriarchs relate comfortably to the women shoppers at the market.

The Ethnics. Vendors who can visually distinguished as members of ethnic minorities are categorized as such by customers. No references are made to the ethnicity of vendors of German origin, who comprise the majority of sellers. Mr. Theopolis and Mr. Nanos, however, are continually referred to by customers as “the Greek flower vendor” and “the Greek Farmer” respectively.

Marcus and Pearl, two African-American employees of a white Michigan farmer, are the only black sellers at the market. In an ironic throwback to the days of slavery, they are referred to by their employer’s last name. Although their booth is frequented by white customers, their strongest patronage comes from African-American, Haitian, and Jamaican customers. The couple characterizes themselves as “country folk” and exude a casual hospitality. They frequently sell out early and leave before noon. Marcus attributes this to his sampling of fruit and cider to passersby. Pearl often suggests a recipe or preparation technique as she chats with customers.

Vendor Interactions

As vendors are thrust together to form the marketplace, we encounter the tension between competition and cooperation mentioned by Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf (1989). Two types of competition are evident; rivalry exists both internally among vendors and externally between the aggregate market and traditional retail grocery outlets. The original market site was adjacent to a major supermarket chain store. Competitive tensions surfaced in the form of territorial squabbles over parking lot usage. These quelled, as both the market vendors and the supermarket manager perceive a symbiosis in the Saturday market location. One store manager noted that:

Saturday is always our biggest day. In the summer when the Farmers’ Market is open, our store is packed. We might lose a little on produce, but we pick up store traffic. You know, there is a pretty limited assortment of things at the Farmers’ Market.

An increased customer flow to the area produces two-stop shoppers who visit the market to buy produce and flowers, snack and socialize, and then proceed to the nearby chain supermarket to purchase meats, dairy products and packaged goods. The new market location separates the farmers’ mar-

ket and the supermarket by a viaduct, which does not present a barrier to the established consumer behavior pattern. (Ironically, the following year the supermarket was demolished and the periodic market moved again, this time to a patch of asphalt that was the foundation of its extinct corporate rival.)

The sellers perceive that the viability of the market depends upon a strong and varied vendor presence. A lone vendor could not attract the necessary consumer crowds that are enticed by the group. Although the Market Commission intentionally plans the market configuration so that those with identical merchandise are not placed in adjacent spaces, competition within the market is evident and unavoidable. Of the 32 vendors who rent spaces for the season and attend regularly, 17 (53%) primarily sell vegetables, 6 (19%) merchandise fruit, 5 (16%) vend cut flowers and plants, and 4 (12%) carry a narrow line of specialized products such as mushrooms, sprouts, or grains. The city instructs, but does not enforce, vendors to keep assortments within their chosen primary category and to limit any ancillary products to 10% of their total offerings. Boundaries of categorical assortments are fuzzy, and become more so toward the end of the growing season. Vegetable vendors bring apples to the market and easily grown vegetables such as zucchini and tomatoes are observed at the booths of those with a predominance of fruit or flowers. The first hard frost abruptly ends the flower season and contracts the product assortment. The seasonal and aggregate range of locally grown products available is limited by the identical climate, growing season, rainfall, and soil type of all vendor farms. Outliers are eyed with suspicion by customers, city officials, and other vendors, and charges of "cheating" or purchasing produce from out-of-the-area wholesalers are leveled against those whose production overruns the accepted harvesting season.

The vendors have no formal organization, but they align themselves informally along lines of regional proximity, location within the market, common attendance at other markets, and longevity at Midville. Those who have been attending the Midville Market the longest assign themselves more status than newcomers and verbalize their desire and right to have more say in its workings. One informant provided a blunt assessment:

I think the charter members of the market ought to have something to say about who comes to their market. The original ones that started right on this street eleven years ago. And the same thing in [other communities]. They should have something to say about who goes to the market. It should be policed. The farms should be regularly visited. A guy comes in from [another state] with mushrooms and strawberries and bedding

plants and vegetables and hanging baskets and you know damn well they don't grow it at all. The girls' remark, the three or four girls' that run that market remark was, "we don't go across the border to check." So ostracize the local grower, but let the guy come in from [another state] and break all the rules. It doesn't make sense. We've got plenty of growers here in [this state]. No reason why we have to go solicit across the border. And a lot of the stuff gets dumped on this market. The first or second year they had a truck come in from [another area] with a load of sweet corn. Now with sweet corn, everybody brings their ten or fifteen bags, the amount they know they can sell. This guy came in with a dump truck load and put everybody in the market out of business. And this was the last they saw of them. Now this is what I call a prostitute. A one-night stand. They never saw him again. The other farmers were here every week. They are the ones that count. Not this guy that brings in the one-shot deal, just to hurt the other guys. Or just to hurt them or not, I just think that the ones who commit to the market and do it steady, who bring in good merchandise and all that, they should have preference. Fine, the people in Midville got cheap corn one time, at the expense of seven or eight farmers.

Without a formal retailer cooperative structure, the vendors informally monitor each other. The first order of business each market day involves a "walk through" by vendors shortly after their arrival and before set-up is complete. Often under the guise of socializing with other vendors or going for coffee, they note their competitors' prices, assortment, and display so as to make early adjustments in their own promotion and price mix. Suspicions and discrepancies are reported to the Market Master or recognized members of the city's Farmers' Market Commission.

Direct price comparisons are difficult to assess. Unit price comparisons among identical products are virtually impossible to make, as ambiguous container sizes and definitions such as "a basket" or "a bowl" make equality difficult to access. Some items, notably tomatoes, are sold by the pound at a few booths, but the buyers' lack of a visual reference for the bulk involved in this measure makes it as ambiguous as those in specific container sizes, such as quarts.

Product attributes took precedence over price concerns among both vendors and consumers. A mushroom vendor articulates the pricing philosophy of many vendors:

You can't sell at the Farmers' Market at a price basis. The number one premise is fresh commodity. One lady came up to

me at one of the markets and asked where are the bargains. I said, "Lady, we don't sell bargains, we sell fresh merchandise." She looked at me and bought a bag of mushrooms, much to my dismay.

In a similar manner, the following consumer comment highlights quality and freshness, rather than price:

You can't get the same quality in the stores is my experience in the summer because they get it from California. Like tomatoes and fresh corn, if you try to buy it locally in the supermarket, it's not local produce. It's from a long ways away and its not fresh, so in the summer I buy all my tomatoes, corn, cucumbers, things like that, here because I prefer it.

Stated prices generally remain firm. Unlike other markets of this genre (Sherry 1988, 1990b), there is little price dickering and market pitching in evidence. Free sampling and recipe sharing are the principal point-of-purchase promotions, and quantity discounts are in some evidence. Vendors generally eschew attempts at negotiation, as demonstrated previously in our comments on vendor profiles. So strong is this convention that one vendor interprets his assignment to a peripheral (and to his mind inferior) market location as punishment for his barking in previous years. City representatives deny his assertions and express surprise at his observation and outrage.

Consumer Participants

The customers at this market reflect the demographics of the community in type but not in proportion. Midville has a minority population of approximately 40%, while the minorities in evidence at the market are estimated to be between 10% and 15%. The customer population appears generally whiter, older, more educated, and more upscale than the aggregate city population. Although males and children are present at the market, females dominate in number and in purchasing activity. Few teenagers are seen in this setting. Most customers are ultimate consumers or agents of household purchases, although persons buying for local restaurants and churches are occasionally observed.

Consumers are visually distinguishable as city people. They sport styled hair and are costumed in fashionably casual apparel and expensive athletic shoes that are the uniform of a suburban Saturday. Their soft hands and pale, sometimes doughy bodies contrast conspicuously with those of

vendors. In previous work we have typologized buyers at this market characterized by the time of day they regularly attend (Heisley, McGrath, and Sherry 1991). The first etic category is **The Die Hards** who attend between 6 and 7:30 am. They brave inclement weather to aggressively search for the best and freshest of the product assortment. **The Sociable Die-Hards** consider themselves early birds when they appear between 7:30 and 9 am. They combine their desire for good product selection with the need to visit with friends and vendors. **The Very Social** arrive between 9 and 11 am when the market is most crowded and generally spend more time talking with acquaintances than shopping at the market. **The Late People, Bargain Hunters and Night People**, shop between 11 am and 2 pm. These groups are neither particular about the quality of the merchandise they purchase nor do they evidence a social group connectedness.

There is a rhythm and temporal cyclicity to both the market day and the market season. Customers learn what to expect both over the short and long term duration of the market, and alter their behavior based on this learning. Even though customers express preferences for shopping at specific times each Saturday, more consumers make mention of being late than of being early or on-time. Awareness of being late deters neither shopping nor socializing. Once at the market site, consumers visit when they see friends; there is no observable evidence of shoppers rushing to finish and leave. A second aspect of chronology are consumer mentions of produce seasonality. Harvest becomes a reference point for time, with the present being “too early for tomatoes,” “too late for corn,” or “the last day for peaches.” The market on September 20 is peppered with “Last Day for Corn” signs. Unlike customers’ expectations in traditional retail grocery settings, similar items regularly appear for sale at similar booths and then simultaneously disappear from the inventory of all vendors due to their bounded seasonality. Consumers learn to anticipate these cycles, and whether or not they plan for them, there is evidence that they derive some enjoyment from the phenomenon. The transitory advent and vanishing of seasonal merchandise contributes to making this market authentic in that it offers proof that the source of the product assortment is the fields of these regional farmers.

Transporting purchases at an outdoor market poses a challenge met by the grocery cart in a traditional supermarket setting. Consumers routinely carry shopping bags, baskets, and canvas and woven bags in which they consolidate smaller plastic bags offered by individual vendors. Customers who consider themselves ecologically aware often refuse these nonbiodegradable plastic bags or reuse their own. In addition to bringing bags,

many shoppers conspire to bring a companion, often a reluctant family member and usually a child or spouse. For example:

Gloria Stephens is a tall, attractive blond woman in her early 40s shopping with her 12-year-old daughter. The mother looks strikingly fashionable in a strapless sun dress and a large, straw picture hat. She is married and has three children; this is her youngest child. She sent her daughter back to the bake sale booth where the women had no change for an earlier purchase. Her daughter appeared to be with her to perform errands and to carry items. She never asked her what foods she would like to buy, nor did she speak with her very much. "My husband has talked about the Farmers' Market all week, so I thought he'd go today. But he had an appointment. He's such a romantic about this, but he's never had to schlep the stuff."

Ann Kearney (W-F-45) is shopping with two daughters, Molly in high school and Megan in college. The three are doing recreational shopping. They are enjoying each other's company. Rather than a mother-daughter hierarchy, they shop as three good friends. Ann is willing to purchase anything in which they express interest. She does carry the money and does all the actual buying. The girls choose and carry the purchases.

The persons accompanying the buyer frequently socialize, sample, and suggest, but their role as pack-person predominates. They tote purchases as the shopping continues and disappear at intervals to convey items to the nearby family vehicle.

The two-wheeled shopping cart poses a less-social alternative to the pack-person companion. Consumers view the possession of these carts as a semiotic concomitant to being "a regular" at the market. Several informants spoke of the symbolic and practical significance of owning such a cart:

My husband went to the market with me once. On the way home, he stopped at the hardware store and bought this cart. That was the last time he went to the market.

We've got our carts. Now we have to fill them. Some people think that if they had a cart they would be too 'regular.'

A cart is a passage into serious Farmers' Market shopping. An accompanying pack-person may navigate the cart. Coaster wagons, strollers, and bicycles equipped with baskets serve the cart's function, but seem not to have the same symbolic significance.

Consumer Choices

Three variables interact to determine which items a consumer will purchase on a given day: the assortment of items in-season and available, the general food and plant preferences of the shopper and other household members, and on-site verbal and visual input from vendors, acquaintances, and members of the household. The selection of items for sale at any given market is finite and determined by the growing season. All vendors are from a local three-state area, and experience virtually simultaneous harvest seasons.

The two remaining selection variables are social. Shoppers and companions often discuss food. A woman may ask her child or spouse if he or she wants a specific item such as corn or apples that week. For some items in abundant supply especially cider, the shopper and her pack-person companion may sample and discuss several different varieties before buying. If a new food, one which has not been tried or purchased previously, is being considered, the mother/wife may ask her companion outright, "Will you eat it?" This is most often true with respect to vegetables such as types of squash, kale, swiss chard, and sprouts. Exchanges of news, greetings, and recipes between acquaintances are common at the market, as a field note excerpt illustrates:

Jane (W-40-mother of two teens) stands near Perkins' booth, which is heaped with very large green, red, and golden sweet peppers. She relates a recipe for Tex-Mex stuffed peppers. As she ends the recitation of the recipe, another friend comes by, and she repeats it from the beginning. This happens four times. Only I write the recipe down, but everyone buys several peppers, evidently planning to make the dish. One friend remarks, 'I know what everyone in [Midville] will be having for dinner tonight.'

In a similar manner, a researcher observed another woman repeat her recipe for garlic-stuffed miniature eggplants. Although no one wrote down the recipe, several listeners purchased the little eggplants, evidently planning to prepare the dish from memory.

Many market purchases appear to be serendipitous, impulsive, and immediate responses to sensory stimulation. No observations are recorded of consumers shopping with lists in hand, a common sight in the retail supermarket. Consumers buy what one informant characterizes as "what we feel like eating" or "what looks good," rather than what has been planned in advance or items required to restock a prescribed home inventory. The predominance of perishables at the market and the inability to precisely

predict produce available prime may contribute to this transitory and impulsive shopping style.

Perhaps the most intriguing discovery was the tendency of consumers to consistently overbuy within the cornucopic market. Customers express distress with their over-participation in the market by articulating their tendency toward quantity buying decisions when purchasing at the market. Informants speak of consistently buying too much from week to week. For example, one man sums up his family's weekly shopping behavior at the Midville market:

We overbuy every week, throw it away, and start over again on Saturday.

Jean, a petite aerobics instructor in her late thirties who is married with two teenaged daughters, articulated this dilemma in coming to the market:

I've gotten better. But everything is so gorgeous; it looks so wonderful. It helps if I come every other week. Also look at these peppers. They're three for a dollar. How can you resist, but you don't need three every week?

In a journal excerpt, one of the researchers hypothesized reasons for the overbuying and casual waste based on both observation and her own participation in the activity.

This session made me aware of overbuying—my own and others. People buy large quantities of an item. I find myself doing this as well. Why do I and others buy so much? Part of the influence may be the scale of things here. The outdoors are boundless. I'm not comparing the proportion of my purchases to a cart or even a room. Also I shop hurriedly and I make quick and not necessarily good decisions. I'm anxious to talk with people, and yet I feel that I cannot come home from the market empty-handed. A third consideration is related to my good intentions to present these healthy foods to my family during the intervening week. These often do not get put into action.

People who purport not to waste pursue processing of market items as a serious hobby. Betty and John are a middle aged couple who attend weekly and proudly detail their food storage efforts. Both credit themselves with wisdom and parsimony, but it is Betty who performs the food storage and preservation activities. The quantity of food they buy and preserve appears excessive for two people:

I buy bushels of fruit and have a drier to preserve them. Last week I bought six dozen ears of corn, made corn chowder and

froze it in quarts. I buy more than I want to process, but I process it. I'll find a way to use it. I also feel that I'm supporting the farmers. I'll eat the vegetables instead of meat at this time of the year. And I'll always buy what Phil is selling that day.

Two other informants, Pam and Sandy, are neighbors and longtime friends who shop together each week. Both have carts and meet socially to prepare jams and freeze in bulk. Notes Pam:

I told Sandy I'd make raspberry jam with her today, and we're here to get the berries.

The following week they return for blueberries. Their behavior illustrates the role of women in the reproduction of culture through rituals (Cheal 1988).

Consumers who process food for future consumption appear to waste less than those who shop for a one or two week period. Young Burt Wrenn, one of the longest-standing vendors at the market, expressed awareness of this customer behavior. During an interview he reversed the direction of questioning and asked one of the researchers, "Did you use everything you bought last week?" to which the honest response was a definitive no. In a journal entry the researcher reveals her personal attempt to limit her own buying by consciously bringing a relatively small amount of money to the market.

Today I'm only bringing \$10 with me because I don't really need to buy that much stuff. We hardly made a dent in the produce we brought home last week.

Interactions Between Buyers and Sellers

Consumers frequently reference the character and personality of a vendor when explaining vendor choice and loyalty. As they describe their allegiance, informants reveal:

I always buy mushrooms from Mabel [an employee of the grower]. I admire her. She is 75 years old and keeps working.

Bert, the plant man, has more information than anyone I know and he's so funny. I love to talk with him.

Recollected market location is also used to find vendors. Since the site and the physical and relative configuration of the vendors have been altered from the previous year, the need to reorient spatially creates confusion and

annoyance among consumers at the opening of the market and continues to perplex them for several weeks. Consumers “know” vendors by their location and believe they have a more intimate relationship with farmers than with, for example, a supermarket manager in a traditional retailing venue. The market location becomes a symbolic home address where the farmer/vendor, whose farm location the customer may not know, may be found and where the customer may pay a weekly call. Geographic location contributes to relational stability as well as directional orientation, consumers indicate:

The market seems smaller this year. I'm not sure where everything is.

Last week I bought the best tomatoes I have ever had. Now where was that? It couldn't be this booth, because they also had shallots.

Since each vendor maintains the same location for the duration of the market, after the first few weeks regular customers acclimate themselves to the site.

Shopping follows a pattern that begins when the customers enter one end of the two-sided strip of vendors, walk the length of the market to evaluate offerings and/or prices, and then make purchases on the trip back toward the point of entry. Shopping with and shuffling behind key informants, the researchers witness a zigzag pattern of purchases on the return trip down the market midway.

Consumers demonstrate loyalty to the local market concept in addition to their relationships with particular vendors, as these field note excerpts illustrate:

You know people haven't urinated on your tomatoes, like in Mexico.

This is like a church or community. You get used to the vendors and can order ahead.

There is a trust here that you don't have in stores.

Often orders for particular items are placed one week and picked up the next. Such orders often include bulk purchases, such as bushels of tomatoes or apples, and items in short supply, such as gooseberries or currants, or high quality versions of fragile products, such as raspberries or blackberries. One observed instance of such ordering resulted in confusion when the two involved parties evidence different perceptions of abundance. Pam, a middle-aged customer who attends weekly, orders mini-eggplants

from a vendor to be picked-up the following week. When the farmer asks precisely how many eggplants Pam wants, she indicates “as many as you have.” The following week he brings a bushel basket full for his customer, who mistakenly buys one dozen eggplants from a second vendor. The following week the farmer recognizes his customer and asks her where she had been the previous week. Pam expresses embarrassment that she had unknowingly purchased from another vendor and also comments on her misperception of the quantity ordered:

When I said I'd take all he had, I never dreamed that he would bring in a bushel full. I had forgotten that farmers plant acres of produce.

When asked about the incident, Phil laughs and comments, “You win some; you lose some.”

Consumers register interest in merchandise purchased by other consumers and openly ask where items being toted can be obtained. Particularly visible items, such as cut flowers, plants, and large pumpkins tend to become mobile advertisements for certain vendors or for the market itself. Customers absent vendor loyalties may model the shopping patterns of acquaintances whom they perceive to have greater expertise due either to their market experience or their knowledge of foods and food preparation. Recipe exchanges and conversations about food and vendors serve as forums for the revelation of such expertise.

The socially specific construction of the identity of the vendor, and of the significance of the sales encounter by the consumer, is among the most compelling activities we observed at the Midville Market. Vendors become teachers, experts, entertainers, “characters,” and fixtures at the market. There is little admitted “selling” on the market premises. For example, one vendor insists:

It's all teaching. I have to be able to tell people about my product, let them taste it, and give them ideas for ways to fit it into their menus. Sprouts are a new food for many people.

Flower and plant vendors constantly offer unsolicited advice to new owners as to how to care for their charges, such as, “Now water this [potted plant] every other day, and fertilize it once a week”; or “Always keep the basil out of direct sunlight.”

In a similar manner, without asking, consumers are often told how to store and ripen produce. Advice may take the following shape: “Put those peaches in a brown bag for a few days, and they'll ripen up for you just fine;” or “Never put tomatoes into the refrigerator.”

In addition to a proactive teaching role, vendors are viewed as agricultural experts and asked advice by consumers. For example one customer asks a vendor to diagnose the disease attacking an apple tree in his yard. He brings a sample drooping leaf to the fruit grower, who both identifies the parasite and prescribes a cure. Other cases involve consumers seeking information about canning, freezing, ripening, and cooking items available from farmers. Consumers assume that the individuals who grow these items also have an expertise in processing them. This can be an incorrect assumption when applied to the predominantly male farmer group, although the small family-run business often includes female members who have more experience with food preparation.

By virtue of their physical presence within a vendor booth, all workers are perceived as "experts" and "farmers." The former identity is a largely denotative and functional one, which helps to alleviate uncertainty and facilitate mastery for consumers. The latter identity is a richly connotative one, which bears a significant symbolic load. For example, a local student, employed by a fruit vendor on a weekly basis, is asked for advice, even while attired in a high school letter jacket emblazoned with the Midville logo. Customers inquire curiously about his life, assigning him the persona of "farmer," and engage him in small talk about "the ride in this morning," its length, traffic congestion, and highway construction along the route. The young employee claims that he avoids direct inquiries, so as not to disappoint customers, observing: "I do not lie, but I sidestep their direct questions about my life. They want to believe I am a farmer." Consumers literally construct the social role of farmer with which they in turn are able to engage in a meaningful interaction that validates the authenticity of their participation in a bucolic fantasy. Consumers seek assurance that the product being sold is freshly picked (an assurance a local retail grocery had recently begun broadcasting in radio commercials). His employer assures him of this, and he in turn passes this information onto his customers. He also shares information about tastes and uses of various fruits and storage procedures learned from listening to his employer advise other consumers.

In the role of quaint entertainer, vendors are viewed as "characters," and are looked to for amusing witticisms. As such, their eccentricities are not only tolerated but also expected. Most vendors are friendly and convivial, but cantankerousness and quiriness are tolerated when redeemed by a noticeable green thumb. Informants make such remarks as:

I get a kick out of Bert. He always has something funny to say every week;

Hannah is in a crabby mood today, but her mums sure look great;

The Mushroom Lady is really something. Did you know that she's over 75?

The farmer-vendors treat the Midville population with respect and characterize the customers as generally knowledgeable and loyal. Farmers claim to bring their better produce to this market because they perceive the customers to be more concerned about freshness and quality than at some other markets they attend. Vendors observe:

You have an educated population here. They want a good product and they don't expect it to be cheap; I wouldn't even bother to pick for the Eastbank Market. They don't care if it's wilted, as long as it's cheap.

Thus the market's consumer base provides farmers the opportunity to transcend their workaday roles as growers to embody some of the beliefs held by urban Americans of their rural roots.

INTERPRETIVE SUMMARY

The Midville Market emerges as a periodic community with its own ecology, boundaries, periphery, development, members, social relationships, and relationships with other communities. Participants derive pleasure from the relational aspects of this retailing institution. The personal interactions with vendors and consumers develop a loyal clientele that generates sales and sustains the institution. Here "human institution" has successfully shed any oxymoronic notion and has developed to attract a growing and loyal clientele. It is relationship and perceived quality, not price, that guides their interactions and choices. Vendors guide and control this motivating force, in which consumers serve as willing partners.

Four themes in particular emerge from our analysis of the Midville Market. They are nested, in a sense, and serve to integrate our interpretation of marketplace dynamics with perceptions and experiences shared with us by local stakeholders. These themes include activism, authenticity, artificiality, and ambience. We will conclude our analysis with an exploration of each of these issues, beginning with the most embedded, or core theme, and finishing with the increasingly encompassing themes that bound our study.

1. Activism. The market has its origins in an ethos of civic activism, with arguably feminist roots. Conceived as a vehicle of urban revitalization, and guided by a break-even philosophy, the market was launched as

a forum in its truest sense. As a grassroots response to consumers' desire for more varied shopping experiences, the market became an instant success and spawned imitators over time. With its emphasis on controlled chaos, natural cycles, and direct marketing (i.e., vendors are primary producers), it contrasts noticeably with periodic markets of recent ethnographic interest to consumer researchers. It partakes less in the parallel guerrilla economy and perhaps somewhat more in the holistic economy than do flea markets, for example (Sherry 1990a). In that regard its potential for reinvigorating formal retailing may be greater than that of the flea market (Sherry 1990b). Its principal function appears to be one of community building, but the market contributes powerfully to a sense of individual, personal renewal. Shoppers are transformed, even if momentarily (or seasonally) into wise buyers and citizens, concerned for their own physical health and that of the body politic. At the Midville Market, personal identities are communal currency. "Everyconsumer" rubs elbows with neighbors, politicians, ethnics, students, and other segments of the Midville social mosaic. Some vendors and "regular" consumers are recognized as "characters," and are routinely sighted and often engaged as part of the shopping experience. When markets are banished to the periphery of our cities, the enlisting of merchants and customers in the common cause of community building becomes impractical, if not improbable. Our study suggests that the reintegration of market and polity should become a tenet of city planning.

The Midville Farmers' Market is symbolic both in and of the community. Residents perceive it as a strong and positive community symbol. It is an energetic, kinetic relationship between the civic body and the individuals who choose to live within its boundaries. Purity, health, and nature are given a central position in an urban environment ordinarily perceived by consumers to be far removed from nature. The central city location of the farmers' market reflects the hope that this renewed sense of purity and nature will disseminate, displacing the over-engineered surroundings, perhaps representing a step toward integrating urban and rural life. The community receives a halo effect from the market; a community perceived as healthy has a better chance to achieve such health in reality. In addition, the market serves as a magnet, drawing consumers to the central city area and tangibly imparting health and healing to an aging urban center. The symbiosis of city and retail institutions weaves a tapestry of what the community is and of what it wants to be. Yet it takes outsiders, the farmer-vendor-retailers, to concretize and operationalize these symbolic scripts and principles.

Our study suggests that one route to urban renewal would begin with an

alliance of city planners and merchants dedicated to delivering the periodic market experience to consumers at a civic and financial profit. Periodic markets have the power to revitalize. Using existing European markets as an adaptable model, store retailers could dispatch specially equipped trucks—miniature mobile stores in effect—to local sites on designated days of the month. Cities can become proactive in their own vitality by planning for periodic markets and inviting sellers to participate. Such back-to-the-future local responsiveness would serve numerous stakeholders to the transaction.

2. *Authenticity.* The Midville Market is a collective attempt to recapture or recreate an authentic, unmediated experience of a simpler, more wholesome era. It is a revitalization movement (Sherry 1987b) of sorts, where a community strives to create a more satisfying lifestyle for itself. The authenticity at stake is staged, or, more properly, mythopoetic. The social drama enacted is a reactionary one. Farmers are restored to a dimly remembered exalted status. Producers distribute the fruits of their own labors, rather than relying upon predatory intermediaries. Good food and nutritious recipes change hands, temporarily displacing processed convenience foodstuff. People take time to browse, to talk, to stroll. For a few weekend hours, dispassionate and anonymous individuals coalesce into a little village. The market is a hybrid of a “designed experience” (Kotler 1990) and an emergent field reality (Sherry 1990a). The authenticity, level of involvement, and duration demanded by participants collaborating in the market’s production is apparently optimal. It conveys benefits to all stakeholders that less direct forms of marketing seem incapable of providing. A kind of fuzzy logic relationship management is observed.

The market is constructed from the projected reality of its participants. Romantic notions of healthy, contented, and uncomplicated agrarian life attract city consumers and frame the roles of the farmer-vendor-retailers. Relationship management is the order of the day. Farmers quickly realize that they should be having fun and creating fun, because their customers demand this as a respite from their own harried urban lives. Together they help animate the market, all the while observing each other for cues and clues that may suggest alterations in their respective roles. The final (and profitable) performance emerges as an amalgamation of the demands made by consumers, vendors, and the city itself. This market, similar to a mall or shopping district, is a destination to which participants flock for mutual corroboration and confirmation. By realizing that distribution is promotion, store retailers might experiment with non-store techniques we have discussed. Periodicity of sidewalk sales might be increased. Bin sales might be institutionalized. Itinerant street vendors might be recruited. Lay-

out might be varied. Manufacturers might be enlisted as periodic sales personnel. The possibilities for reinvigorating retailing are legion.

And yet, unlike the labors that characterize service encounters in the supermarket—arguably the site where we most often engage the “fetishized commodities of daily life” (Willis 1991)—the work occurring at the Midville Farmers’ Market is a symbolically charged performance of productive labor. Sellers enable buyers to enact a small scene in a larger agrarian myth. In foraging across the stalls for produce so fresh the dirt in which it was grown still clings to it in validation of its authenticity, in pursuing the small talk with the bearers of an idyllic culture which both enlightens and ennobles, and in enduring the physical rigors that an open air market demands, consumers invest the Midville Market experience with the kinds of symbolic and use values unattainable in more obviously contrived, theme park-like retail settings.

Entrepreneurs might well search for analogous opportunities to commodity the deep structural characteristics that allow cultures or subcultures to reify themselves. These exist whenever core values can become “emplaced,” in the phenomenological sense. By suffusing cultural axioms with a sense of place, a compelling plea for consumer participation can be delivered. A secular pilgrimage is readily mobilized, as visitors to such sites as Branson, Missouri, Heritage Village, or Old Williamsburg will report. Perhaps Anita Roddick’s “Body Shops” are the most currently cogent store-based example of this principle.

Retailers must consciously realize and judiciously use the power that is implicit in their role. Even the most educated consumers view them as experts in their fields and yearn to believe that, especially in the area of food, retailers have the best interests of their customers in mind. Consumers attribute to produce vendors a health orientation approaching that of a physician. Thus the food retailer needs to evidence personal participation in a healthy lifestyle and diet, as well as prescribe and encourage such an existence in his or her customers. Recipes and tasting contribute to this, as does the robust, outdoorsy appearance of the farmer/vendors. In addition, customers appreciate and expect vendors to ask about their personal well-being.

3. *Artificiality.* Ironically, shopping, socializing, and selling at the farmers’ market carry with them a strong experiential component that dictates an almost unattainable idealism. As customers purchase produce and flowers, they sample, participate in, and buy a lifestyle from which they block the darker side. The vendor/farmers at a greenmarket are vertically integrated marketing organizations and their success parallels, mir-

rors, and predicts that of other integrated retail businesses such as Crate and Barrel, The Gap, and Banana Republic. Such contexts, which are essentially retail theme parks, offer consumers the option to be physically present and actively experiencing an idealized version of an aspired lifestyle. The difference between the aforementioned retail chains and a farmers' market is that such chains construct interior, home-like prototypes, while the farmers' market fabricates an outdoor rural environment for city dwellers. All such retail venues feign authenticity while surrounding the consumer with a myriad of items which are both props essential to the set and items available for purchase. Customer comfort in such contexts emanates from a sanitized and fastidious construction of reality. The setting is often larger than life, but, more importantly, it must be nicer than life. Simulated home settings contain no dust balls, junk mail, or soiled laundry; the fabricated farm scene excludes talk and evidence of drought, foreclosures, rural isolation, spoiled crops, dead animals, and chemical fertilizers, while it inflates freshness and down-home friendliness. The consumer participant need only be present; no work is dictated. The ambience of the scene combined with the comfort of a passive role enhances the shopping experience. Vendors should consciously nurture and comfort consumers, while they leave their personal needs backstage.

Similarly, vendors, customers, and the city exercise an implicit faith in what is essentially a misnaming of the institution itself. The possessive designation "Farmers' Market" is a fictitious title, as the market belongs to the city, not to the farmers. Meanwhile, continued ritual participation strengthens those myths the city, consumers, and sellers have about themselves and their society. City fathers (and mothers) fret about the purity and integrity of a greenmarket, which they know is often suspect, while they perpetuate the market, with any shortcomings, as appropriate for the community. Consumers yearn to believe that produce is locally grown and freshly picked and that they themselves are informed about and indulged by the function, flavor, and fashion of food. Farmers participate, similar to employees in a more conventional retail setting, knowing that this is a worthwhile source of employment so long as they serve and entertain. Corporate retail competitors support the effort, convinced that their own best longterm interests are served by the market. All participants temper authenticity with impression management.

4. *Ambience.* The immediacy and semiotic intensity (Sherry 1990a) of the Midville Market are undeniable. In an era when sales encounters are frequently dehumanized, mechanized, and formalized, the Midville Market generates a servicescape (Bitner 1992) best likened to retail theater.

The ambience of the market is one that engages every sensory modality, sometimes to the point of synaesthetic overstimulation. Being unconfined by ceilings or walls, overflowing into the city's retail district, and reacting to the vagaries of Midwestern summer weather, the market becomes a larger than life production when compared to conventional retail settings. Consumers literally get "carried away," and indulge in behaviors at once more experimental and more wasteful than the more rational patterns they attempt to exhibit in grocery stores. The disinhibiting ambience of the market is striking.

This ambience contrasts strikingly with the failing American flirtation with the hypermarket, whose design (size, layout, assortment) with few exceptions has proven daunting to consumers. In an era of downsizing, "decomplexing," and decentralizing, scale profoundly affects inhibition. By engaging and manipulating more sensory modes in a more confined physical setting, store retailers may be able to harness the semiotic intensity of the open air market in the service of experiential and experimental consumption. Sherry and McGrath (1989) have described such outlets in their study of specialty retailers. "Boutiquing" in department stores, "farm-standing" in grocery produce sections, and variable-length leasing in shopping malls are examples of efforts made by retailers to repackage consumption experience in an effort to deliver greater variety on a more humane scale. Attention to and manipulation of the various sensory aspects (tastes, fragrances, colors, and textures) appears to intensify this experience. The adoption of the Western European shopping arcade concept to suit the temperament of U.S. consumers is another potential outcome of the cross-pollinating of store retailing with periodic market principles.

Perhaps most intriguingly, the Midville Farmers' Market is an example of what Oldenburg (1989) has called the "third place," which encompasses the "core settings of informal public life." Such a site is host to "the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work." The Midville Market fosters an experience for the economically distressed that compensates in part for austerity, and for the affluent, one that money cannot buy. The Midville Farmers' Market facilitates the kind of "collective rituals and unplanned social gatherings" that mitigate some of the alienation that much of our consumer culture engenders (Oldenburg 1989). The third-place character of such periodic markets is beginning to be adopted by some formal sector retailers to revitalize the shopping experience (Sherry 1990b). Clearly, supermarkets can do more than merely reanimate their produce sections (Willis 1991) if they borrow comprehensively from the ethos the farmers' market celebrates.

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Our observations and interactions with the farmer/vendors suggest a number of successful lessons our folk merchants can share with traditional retailers. Following are a series of elements that can be incorporated into retail settings and marketing interactions. These need not be mutually exclusive, and are suggested in skeletal form with detailed specifics left to the individual needs and creativity of the marketer. An accompanying caution involves the limits of their incorporation. Settings too sanitized or fashionably trendy may spawn consumer rejection and give rise to new, more primitive alternative markets. Crace (1992) demonstrates this with the fictional Soap Market in his novel *Arcadia*. We propose the assessment of appropriate and maximum levels of these elements as a question for further research.

1. *The Cornucopia Element*. This approach emphasizes the aspect of plenty in a retail assortment. It involves visually overstocking merchandise. Visual displays would best be asymmetrical and disorderly, burgeoning from baskets or tables rather than neatly arranged in rows or on racks. The highlight is the quantity, color, and texture of merchandise. Smells abound. Artificial olfactory stimulation, such as leather, perfume, flowers, or fruit, may be added to the context, or natural smells may be enhanced. For example an in-store bakery may be centrally located so that the smell of baking bread (itself associated with homeyness and sustenance) permeates the retail context. Samples are available in each product category. Consumer choice becomes a celebration of bounty. Customers enjoy a myriad of sensory experiences, and, to compensate for this pleasure and entertainment, literally buy themselves out of the store. This is a direct parallel to observed behaviors at the farmers' market, and also in gift and clothing shops and at jumble and rummage sales.

2. *The "Little Man" Element*. The "little man" (Vander Bergh 1991) has a cultural and literary heritage traced from Italian Renaissance clowns to Charlie Chaplin's characters to modern day Woody Allen films. The classic "little Man" mocks self and maintains a strong sense of humor. Simultaneously, he or she is common-sensical, humane, self-aware, hopeful, innocent, vulnerable, and honest. The "little man" is also counter-cultural and iconoclastic. The retailer who adheres to the "little man" strategy admits to being fallible, all the while doing his or her best to be reliable and consistent. The "little man" operates a human institution and interacts with the customer as an equal. The customer is somewhat entertained by this self-effacing individual who is authentic, though imperfect.

3. *The Nostalgia Element*. The nostalgia strategy embodies the best of

what adults remember about the past, often focusing on notions of the retail setting experienced in childhood. Low-tech, high-touch aspects of retailing predominate. Counter heights may be elevated, to give the adult the shopping perspective of a child. Larger merchandise and display pieces give the observer the perspective of being physically smaller than in present reality. Shopping is more labor intensive and pre-packaging is eschewed. Customers are allowed, even encouraged, to make individualized choices. Store personnel maintain the role as helpful experts who can advise on aspects of preparation, storage, seasonality, and display. The human dimension replaces the concept of self service. Adult memories of attending outdoor markets as a child may highlight sociability, entertainment, and a sense of safety rather than assortment.

CONCLUSION

Researchers have documented the impact of the depersonalization of retailing upon contemporary consumers (Forman and Sriram 1991), and have advised formal sector practitioners to adopt aspects of periodic markets to mitigate this impact (Sherry 1990a, 1990b). Growth in retail sales in the coming decade is projected to occur outside rather than inside of shopping centers, especially given the slow rate of response of less direct forms of distribution to changes in consumer preference patterns, technology, and competitive conditions (Ghosh and McLafferty 1991). That such "indirection" characterizes most marketing is perhaps diagnostic of consumer dissatisfaction. Midville marketers deliver product and experience with low tech, high touch panache, in full complicity with their customers. The short-term manifest demand for connotatively charged perishable goods is satisfied as a matter of course. The longer term latent longing for *communitas* is mollified, but not provided as a critical part of the bargain. Each of these particular demands is eternal. As the growth of nonstore retailing continues to outstrip that of store retailing, a forum such as the Midville Farmers' Market can serve both as a model for reconstructing store-based servicescapes and as a moveable magnet or floating anchor for retail revitalization.

The implications of our study for the various constituencies of marketing research converge most compellingly into and upon a much neglected issue: the production of consumption (Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1993). The polylogue that is marketing (Sherry 1990a) is negotiated with the stuff and processes of exchange, in our present study by consumers, marketers, and public policy makers. We have shown how each of these actors seeks to produce the experience of consumption through the vehicle of the mar-

ket. In this study, as in others (Bitner 1992; McGrath 1989; Sherry 1990a; Sherry and McGrath 1989), the impact of place on the production of consumption is telling. The physical, psychological, and mythic dimensions of place are manipulated by the actors to catalyze and canalize exchange. Consumers seek projectable fields to indulge their fantasies and test their realities. Marketers enhance their wares (literally converting them to “goods” and hopefully “bests”) by recognizing them as a locus of meaning production and transfer (Levy 1978; McCracken 1986), and by managing relationships with consumers that unlock the experiential potential of the sales encounter. Public policy makers channel marketplace cathexis toward civic ends. By institutionalizing as primary a mechanism as a periodic market, city planners harness economic and symbolic resources in the service of community development, and conceivably in the service of economic redevelopment.

Specific implications are several. Consumers can learn to reawaken to fundamental extraeconomic functions of the marketplace. Marketers can learn to rediscover the primacy of design—at the simple structural level of retail atmospherics, by doing such things as bringing the outside in, or celebrating the scarcity tied to seasonality, and at the more complex level of relationship management, by adopting strategies grounded in the phenomenology of the consumer. Public policy makers can promote ecologically considerate bioregional economies, and make the reclamation of the family farm a platform priority. Each of these initiatives, as well as others implicit in their working out, can be pushed toward the truly actionable by the kind of exploratory naturalistic inquiry represented in our field study. A grounded understanding of direct and indirect marketing, formal and informal retailing, and other spuriously dichotomous exchange behaviors will advance our theoretical and practical enterprises in more synergistic directions.

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