

Original Article

Gascoyne Growers Market: A sustainable health promotion activity developed in partnership with the community

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Abstract

Objective: To explore the social, health and economic impact of a farmers' market on a small rural community in the north of Western Australia.

Design: Qualitative and quantitative research using a random structured intercept survey, and focus group interviews around four domains of social capital: economic impact, governance and capacity building, healthy public places and social and civic participation.

Setting: The Gascoyne Growers Markets in Carnarvon.

Subjects: One hundred consumers and 28 market stallholders.

Results: Consumers demonstrated community pride and an increase in fruit and vegetable consumption since they commenced shopping at the markets. The stallholders appear to have gained economically, professionally and socially from the market experience.

Conclusions: The Gascoyne Growers Markets demonstrate a sustainable health promotion activity developed in partnership with the community. It has contributed to the local economy, providing local quality fruit and vegetables directly to the community while also increasing social capital and creating a healthy public space.

KEY WORDS: community participation, health promotion, nutrition, social capital, sustainability.

Introduction

In Australia people in the country have worse health than their metropolitan counterparts.¹ Explanations for this include poverty, culture and a lack of social support.² Cross-cultural tensions in small towns may

also contribute to both physical and mental ill health.³

The Gascoyne 'Living in the Regions' report in 1999 indicated a high perception of community division.⁴ Another health-related issue in the region was the lack of convenient access to local produce despite being a horticultural region.

In response to these issues the Gascoyne Growers Markets (GGM) were established in accordance with health promotion principles, viz:

Health promotion can be regarded as a combination of educational, organisational, economic and political actions designed with consumer participation to enable individuals, groups and whole communities to increase control over and to improve their health through knowledge, attitudinal, behavioural, social and environmental changes.^{5,6}

This was a public health strategy designed to develop social capital and improve access to local produce.⁷ Founded through 'consumer participation', the population health unit funded a health promotion officer (J.P.), also the wife of a primary producer, to be the project facilitator. This dedicated position coupled with a willingness of the producers to purchase stalls ('economic actions') and education of the Shire Council and local consumers ('educational actions') led to their support ('political actions'). A partnership between health, agriculture, primary producers and local government was formed and resulted in the establishment of the GGM ('organisational actions'). Operating every Saturday morning from May to November the markets have grown from eight stallholders and 600 consumers in 2001 to 17 stallholders with over 2000 people in 2004.

In a setting where the viability of Australian agriculture is in debate,⁸ farmers' markets Australia-wide are earning country communities 40 million dollars a year.⁹ A farmers' market is defined by the Australian Farmers' Market Association as:

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What is already known on this subject:

- *Farmers' markets have been identified as a way to address gaps in food supply and become incubators for increased social interaction.*
- *The physical environment can be the catalyst for social cohesion and improved health.*
- *Social capital can be a facilitator of economic development, and the association between social and economic factors and health is well established.*

Predominantly a fresh food market that operates regularly within a community, at a focal public location that provides a suitable environment for farmers and food producers to sell farm origin and associated value added processed food products, directly to consumers.⁹

In keeping with the dialogue recognising the 'social' component of such movements,¹⁰ farmers' markets have four primary aims: to support and stimulate profitable trading of independent primary producers through value adding; to provide regular supplies of fresh food and access to improved nutrition; to contribute to the economic, social and health capital of the host community; and to preserve farmland and sustainable agriculture.

Recognised as a means to address gaps in food supply and provide an opportunity for local industry, farmers' markets are historically a part of the pivotal food chain that has been replaced with supermarket chains.^{9,11}

Unlike supermarket customers who usually shop alone, over three quarters of consumers at farmers' markets arrive in the company of others and are four times as likely to have an encounter with a seller, or fellow consumer.¹² The association between social and economic factors and health is established.^{13,14} Farmers' markets provide the potential for increased community interaction as well as economic prosperity.¹⁵⁻¹⁷

With health promotion principles in mind,⁶ this research project was formulated to measure three components of change as a result of the GGM: social capital and fruit and vegetable consumption.

Method

Quantitative and qualitative research was conducted in 2003. Trained interviewers conducted an intercept survey of customers over four weeks of the markets. Health service staff and people under 18 years of age were excluded from the study.

What this study adds:

This paper provides a model for other rural towns to:

- *Harness local resources and develop existing assets.*
- *Deliver practical benefits to a rural community.*
- *Increase the local economy and build community pride.*

All the stallholders (primary producers) were invited to complete a questionnaire and attend two focus groups conducted by an independent facilitator. After all participants had signed a confidentiality disclaimer the focus groups were taped and transcribed.

The questionnaires, based on studies by the Project for Public Spaces report,¹⁸ modified to include measures of social capital¹⁹ were structured around four domains: indicators of economic impact, governance and capacity building, healthy public spaces and social and civic participation.

All scales have been published and subjected to validation and reliability.^{18,19} Internal validity was assessed through pretest procedures including both an Indigenous and Vietnamese representative. Consumer and stallholder perceptions were ranked in order of importance using Likert scales.

Quantitative data were entered into SPSS (version 11.0, SPSS) for management, variable manipulation and analysis. Key categories using Likert scales were combined to one rating where responses were heavily weighted, for clarity.

Qualitative data were coded around identified themes and compared within the group to identify similarities and differences. The data were de-identified to protect the confidentiality of participants.

The final analysis included integration of the quantitative data with representative quotes from the focus groups to illustrate findings.

Results

One hundred consumers were interviewed with 24 refusals. One quarter were visitors to the region, two-thirds (63%) were women and 72% were born in Australia, of which eight per cent were Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander descent.

Approximately 60% of those interviewed shopped at the markets weekly with 19% shopping at the markets for the first time. Half (51%) reported shopping at the markets for less than 12 months. Around three quarters

(76%) arrived at the markets in the company of family or friends. Since starting shopping at the markets over two-thirds of people (71%) said they were eating more fruit and vegetables, with one quarter (27%) increasing consumption by more than 40% (Table 1).

Almost everyone stated that they shopped at the markets due to the satisfaction gained from shopping locally (99%) and having access to local produce (98%). Shopping outdoors (91%) and contact with other people (94%) were also cited. In contrast, 40% were not interested in comparing prices, talking to the stallholders about their produce (41%) or meeting new people (34%) (Table 2).

A high proportion of consumers demonstrated a willingness to tell others about the markets (99%); pledged support for the markets (94%); shared product knowl-

edge (93%) and had an increased sense of community pride (92%). Over half the respondents (53%) said that they did not seek produce from stallholders during the week (Table 3).

Stallholder analysis

All 28 of the stallholders participated in the study. The majority (75%) were female and around two-thirds (64%) were Australian, the rest identifying as African, Asian and European. Stallholder activities were operated equally between one family member or a combination of family members and friends with up to five additional staff on some stalls. Over one-third of stallholders had employed this help as a result of business activity generated through the markets. All stallholders reported an increase in earnings since joining the GGM, citing the economic value of the markets as impetus for continued involvement.

If we cost it out in terms of a holiday we'd realise how valuable the markets are!

When asked to identify what being a stallholder allowed them to do most stated that the GGM provided income that could be reinvested to diversify (46%), expand (69%) or become a catalyst for other business links (39%).

I have taken a big step with diversification and although the risk was small because I grew small amounts, the rewards were huge. Now I am expand-

TABLE 1: *Fruit and vegetable consumption through Gascoyne Growers Markets 2003 (n = 100)*

% of increased consumption	n (%)
Valid	
0	29 (29)
1-20	20 (20)
20-40	24 (24)
40-60	17 (17)
60-80	8 (8)
80-100	1 (1)
>100	1 (1)
Total	100 (100)

TABLE 2: *Reasons why consumers shop at the Gascoyne Growers Markets 2003 (n = 100)*

Reasons for shopping	Disagree (%)	Doesn't matter (%)	Agree (%)
I have access to local, fresh, quality produce	1	1	98
I can buy produce that is cheaper	1	11	88
It is easier to buy from here than elsewhere	4	14	82
I enjoy shopping outdoors	2	7	91
I find Saturday morning shopping suits me	12	16	72
I like the idea of being able to compare prices	2	38	60
I like to choose from a wide range of food	1	5	94
I can try different foods	1	12	87
I enjoy the social outing	0	13	87
I have contact with people	0	6	94
I meet new people	15	19	66
I am satisfied knowing I have bought locally	0	1	99
I like it when the stallholder tells me about their produce	1	14	85
I tell stallholder about their produce	17	23	60
I have contact with people I don't often see	6	14	80
I enjoy it as a family outing	13	18	69
I enjoy mixing with people of different cultures	2	27	71

TABLE 3: Consumers feelings about the Gascoyne Growers Markets 2003 ($n = 100$)

Consumers' feelings	Disagree (%)	Doesn't matter (%)	Agree (%)
I look forward to my visits to the markets	2	10	88
I have shared ideas with the stallholders	36	39	25
I have visited stallholders during the week for produce	53	6	41
I know I can find out about the produce I am buying	4	3	93
I would be willing to support the markets in any way I can	1	5	94
I feel proud to show our markets to others	0	11	89
I tell other people about the markets	0	1	99
I feel proud to see tourists enjoy what our region has to offer	1	7	92

TABLE 4: Perceptions of stallholder involvement in the Gascoyne Growers Markets 2003 ($n = 28$)

The markets have . . .	Disagree (%)	Doesn't matter (%)	Agree (%)
Given me a say in day-to-day market decisions	7	32	50
Encouraged me to consider going on the committee	36	29	25
Given me confidence to express my views		18	71
Given me confidence to advocate for the markets		7	75
Given me confidence in retail experience		4	93
Helped me improve the marketing of my product		7	89
Helped me learn about shared decision making		29	61
Given me confidence to speak in a group		21	68
Introduced me to other networks		25	68
Shown that improvements to the site could be worthwhile		4	96
Become an area where people want to come		7	93

ing and diversifying taking a bigger risk for the 2004 season. I can gauge success myself now and acceptance from customers is very rewarding.

Satisfaction was not just financial:

Having customers appreciate my product and being told, makes me proud and gives me satisfaction . . . it means more to me than money.

Stallholders identified both professional benefits such as increased confidence in retail (93%) and marketing (89%) experience, and personal gains such as increased confidence to advocate for themselves (75%) and express points of view (71%). This has translated into a wider interest in their community demonstrated through willingness to participate in decision-making processes (61%) and an awareness of other networks relevant to the success of the markets (68%).

I thought I'd be frightened but it doesn't matter now . . . I enjoy it.

I like the idea of being part of a group because it gives us control especially now that the Shire recognises us.

Although half the stallholders were happy to have a role to play in day-to-day decision making only one quarter were interested in being involved in the management committee (Table 4).

The GGM has facilitated contact between stallholders and the community (96%) through customer feedback (96%) and with other stallholders (96%) and made them feel happier (89%). A high proportion (86%) enjoyed meeting people from different cultures. It has also provided them with common ground and has developed a sense of pride in knowing they have something to offer (89%).

I love selling to people who like my produce and you know you can get back what you put in.

The majority (86%) of stallholders and consumers perceived the market space as safe and believed it brought more people into the town centre on a Saturday morning (95%) with over two-thirds (68%) stating that prior to the GGM they would not have come into town (Table 5).

The markets bring out things in our community that we never thought we had.

TABLE 5: Consumer and stallholder perceptions of the market place, Gascoyne Growers Markets 2003 ($n = 126$)†

The market place location has ...	Disagree <i>n</i>	Doesn't matter <i>n</i>	Agree <i>n</i> (%)
Been a good way of filling a vacant area	1	7	118 (92)
Brought me to a place I would normally not come to as often	17	22	89 (69)
Become a safe place for people to be	3	13	111 (86)
Become a good place to hold other community activities		7	118 (91)
Brought more people into the town centre on a Saturday morning		4	122 (95)
A good image within the community		3	88 (70)

†Includes stallholder response $n = 28$.

Discussion

Similar to results reported by others^{16,17} this study shows that the GGM has provided more than just an economic function. The market experience has become a vital part of the stallholders' and the community's social interaction and has fostered a sense of civic pride.

It appears that the majority of the people have increased their fruit and vegetable consumption. Prior to the GGM individuals could access local produce through farm gate sales but the high frequency of weekly GGM shopping suggested that a contributing factor to this increased consumption may have been the convenience and social setting of the markets as well as the satisfaction of buying a local product.

Involvement of a primary producer's wife, as the project administrator facilitated the active involvement of producers in the creation of the markets. This grass-roots process is consistent with contemporary concepts of health promotion.⁵

While accommodating economic motivations, the GGM has contributed to personal wellbeing through participation in local community life. Kreuter *et al.* state that such a propensity to support a civic activity on an informal basis demonstrates a willingness to participate in the community.¹⁵

As with any evaluation of community interventions, there are a number of limitations that reduce the generalisability of the results. As this was a post-program-only evaluation, it did not include baseline data or a control group for comparative purposes. However, the design was similar to that used in previous evaluations of farmers' markets in the USA.¹⁸ Although the sample was restricted to 100 consumers, 28 stallholders with the sample size of 100 were deemed adequate for a cross-sectional study confined to a descriptive statistical analysis, and the 28 persons comprised the total population of stallholders involved with the GGM.²⁰ The self-report nature of the data is subject to normal limitations of recall and demand characteristics.²¹

Conclusion

The successful establishment of the GGM was dependent on a number of critical factors. The funding of a project officer and acceptance by the stallholders played a key role in achieving a community development approach. The project officer was allocated dedicated time to negotiate the legal and structural requirements for establishing the GGM. This elicited the support from the Shire Council, Health Department and the Gascoyne Development Commission, which has contributed to its sustainability. Farmers' markets have the capacity to address social exclusion and improve the distribution of quality primary produce and may provide another strategy to eradicate food poverty. Governments could consider providing seeding grants to initiate farmers' markets in other rural communities and avoid exhausting local volunteer input or reliance on producers taking the risk of being unsupported.

The integration of a public health perspective into a community-based 'food system' has resulted in increased consumption of fruit and vegetables. This illustrates the influence of structural actions on change in health behaviours.⁶ For the producers the markets have become a complementary outlet providing opportunities to expand and diversify leading to improved marketing and business links and increased profit.

This paper demonstrates a sustainable population health program grounded in the principles of the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion.⁶ The GGM is an example of a community development: asset-based and relationship-driven initiative.²² It provides a model for other rural towns to harness local resources, deliver practical benefits, increase the local economy and build community pride.

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