

Census of MI Farmers Markets COVID-19 Impacts

This document is part of the MI Farmers Market Census series. More available at mifma.org/census



Markets' Experience

UNCERTAINTY

No sector was untouched by the impacts of COVID-19. The 2019 and 2020 seasons were an especially difficult period for market operators who already work with limited resources.¹ There was no one universal experience that all markets shared; each community experienced COVID-19 differently and each market responded uniquely. There were some trends, however:

Market operating revenue dipped...

- Sixty-eight (68%) percent reported a decrease in market revenue in 2020.
- One quarter of markets saw their sponsors reduce their market-day presence and/or monetary support.

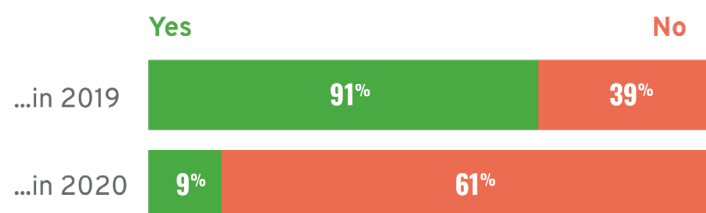
...while expenses increased for many

- Fifty-nine (59%) percent reported an increase in operating expenses.
- While programming expenses decreased, the median market spent \$800 on COVID-related supplies.

Operations Shifted

- One third (32%) of managers worked more hours than the previous year.
- Some markets had a decreased number of volunteers, while others heavily relied on them to enforce COVID guidelines or manage online orders.
- Programming, such as cooking demos or music performances, decreased significantly.

Markets Offering Programming...



¹ See Census briefs on Market Manager Compensation and Market Operations

Market Sizes Were Impacted

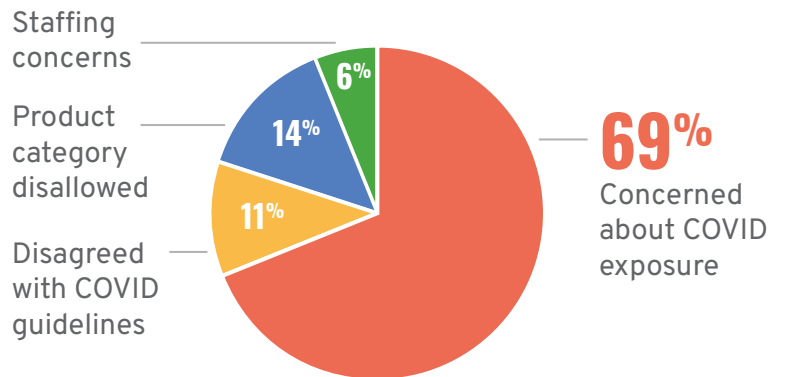
Half of markets (55%) restricted sales in certain categories to allow “essential” items only. Most (85%) saw a drop in vendor attendance due to the pandemic. The average market lost 7 vendors the reasons listed in the chart to the right.

The number of vendors at a typical market **decreased by 48% in 2020**.

Median vendors

29 → **15**
2019 2020

Reasons for Vendor Attrition As reported by market managers



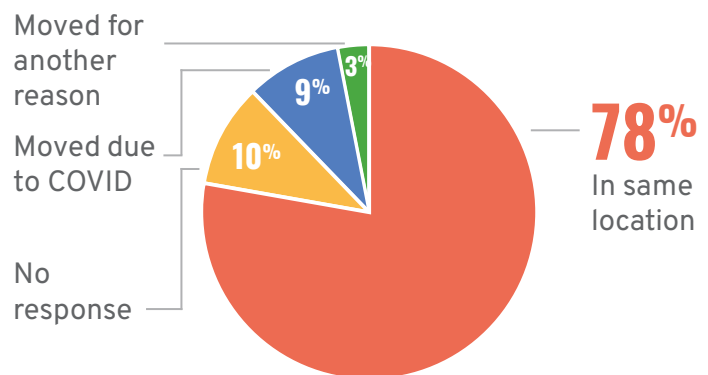
NIMBLE, CREATIVE RESPONSES

Essential Services

Despite the uncertainty, farmers markets were a stable force during the pandemic. In some cases, they flourished, as they were among the few spaces open for “essential” business. Most remained open and operated in the same location: COVID-19 forced only 9% of markets to move to a new location to better accommodate social distancing.

Managers worked closely with vendors and volunteers to operate smoothly; they implemented changes to the market layout, required masking, and leaned on volunteer support to help enforce the new rules. The small number of markets offering programming did so with safety in mind: they leveraged their outdoor environments to increase social distancing, installed handwashing stations; and required masking.

Where Markets Operated in 2020



Most (98%) operated in-person markets in 2020; some added pre-order (20%) or drive-thru (9%) options. Pre-orders were done through paid online platforms such as Open Food Network, or via Facebook or email communication. Only 9% offered all three shopping options, which signals two things: first, that most markets were able to allow customers to safely shop in-person, and second, that most managers did not have capacity to implement additional shopping models in a rapidly changing environment.

A small share (9%) of markets used online sales or pre-order platforms during 2020. While this is a small number, it is more than double the previous year, in which only 4% of markets used these platforms. The most-used products were Local Food Marketplace and Square. Others used Memberleap, Open Food Network, and Shopify. Those who paid for e-commerce products incurred, on average, an additional \$2000 in operating expenses during 2020.

Two markets used a bootstrap approach of email lists and Facebook messages to receive incoming orders. While these were free to use, they had labor costs associated with them, such as administrative time and the learning curve required to implement these systems.

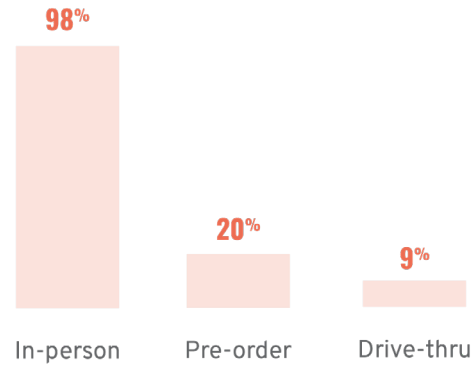
While markets are increasing their use of online platforms for the overall market, it is much more common for individual vendors to use online sales platforms: 39% of markets have at least one vendor who offers online ordering or sales.

A Boom in Local Food Sales

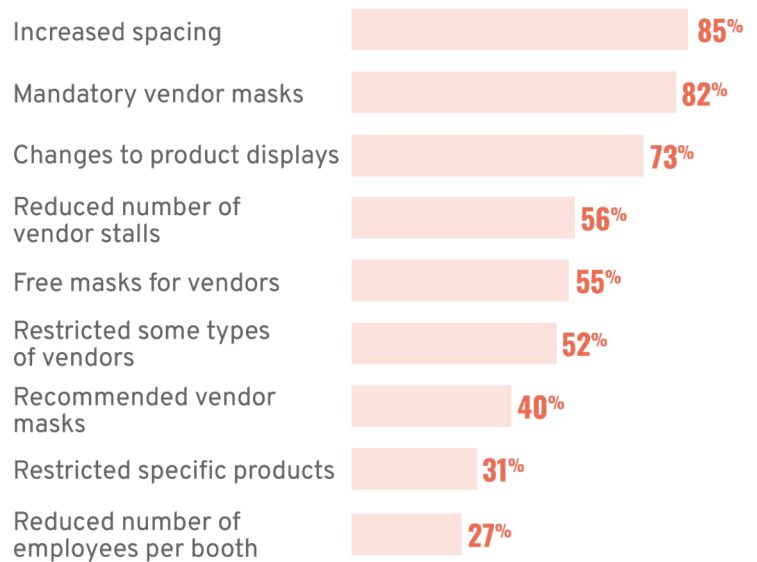
Many markets saw greater demand from customers, resulting in increased vendor sales in 2020.

- 57% said vendors sold out of food products
- 48% said per-vendor sales increased
- 46% said the number of food assistance transactions increased

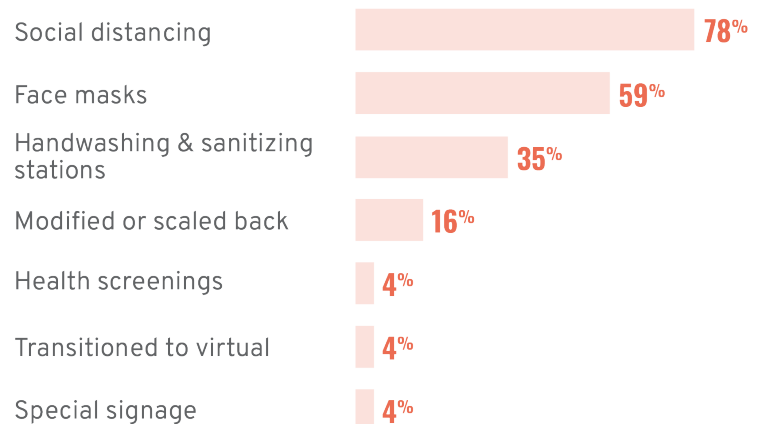
Type of Markets Operating in 2020



Share of Markets Adopting Changes for Vendors



2020 Site & Programming Modifications



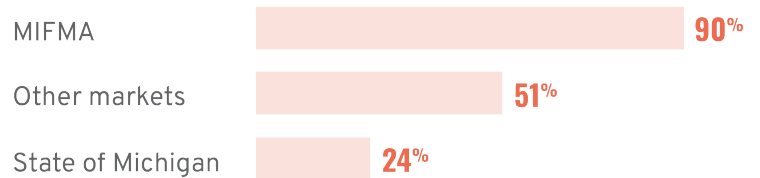
MIFMA's Response

RELIABLE & INFORMATIVE IN A CRISIS

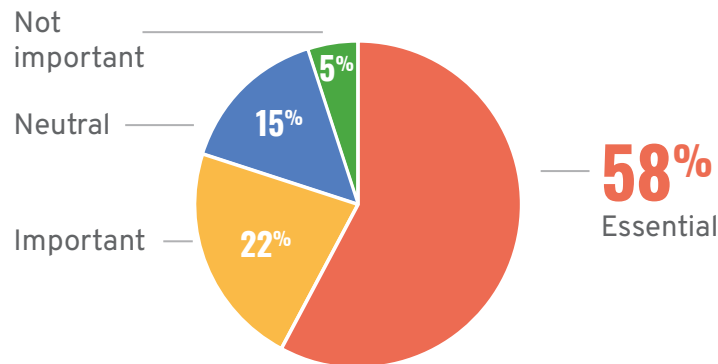
MIFMA closely monitored changing pandemic guidelines, consulted with Michigan's Departments of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) and Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD), and then interpreted the guidelines for a farmers market setting and relayed important messages to markets in real time. **MIFMA was the go-to information source for markets during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Eighty percent (80%) said MIFMA resources were essential or important when deciding if and how to operate in 2020. They said the most helpful resources were FAQ documents, webinars, and phone support.

Share of Respondents Who Consulted with...



How Important were MIFMA resources in deciding if/how to operate?



Key Takeaways

Michigan farmers markets were effective at responding to community needs at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their flexible, adaptable environments and business models positioned them to provide essential services in a crisis. With a culture of collaboration and strong leadership from MIFMA, markets adapted to real-time changes and provided stable environments for vendors and shoppers across the state.