



## Host a Networking Meeting for Local Food Buyers & Suppliers

The Institutional Food Market Coalition (IFM) has hosted numerous networking meetings for local food buyers and suppliers. We often hear from both buyers and suppliers that opportunities to meet face-to-face and establish trust are invaluable to making new business connections on the large volume level. Networking meetings also help businesses learn about each other's needs, a key step in strengthening a local food economy.

### Who is Invited?

Suppliers include farmers, value added businesses, and distributors. The buyers include restaurant chefs, food service directors from institutions, grocery store buyers, and distributors. Include associations, government, and Extension that work with these groups in your planning and ask them to help with outreach.

### Meeting Agenda

Consider if you want your meeting to include an educational component or a panel discussion in addition to networking time. This may help draw attendees. However, too many speakers can overwhelm attendees.

In our sample agenda, right, we include a time at the beginning of the meeting for all attendees to introduce themselves. These introductions are brief, but helpful for attendees to identify particular people or businesses they wish to meet throughout the day.

You can include several styles of networking in your meeting, as different styles will work best for different personalities. Exhibitor tables are one option if your meeting will be large. One-on-one networking, similar to "speed dating," may be appropriate if you predict that few of your attendees have previously met.

### Sample Agenda

#### 9:00 to 9:10 - Welcome

#### 9:10 to 10:00 - Local Produce Panel

Leaders in local sourcing discuss how they make local produce in foodservice succeed. Panelists include a foodservice director, farmer, and distributor.

#### 10:00 to 10:15 - Who's In the Room?

All attendees will briefly introduce themselves.

#### 10:15 to 11:45 - Small Group Networking

Attendees will sit at round tables in mixed groups of farmers, foodservice professionals, and distributors. Each table will have a facilitator. Attendees will discuss their interest in buying or selling local produce. Attendees will change tables every 20 minutes.

#### 11:45 to 12:30 - Local Food Lunch

Enjoy a delicious lunch while networking continues.

#### 12:30 to 1:00 - Group Discussion

We will have a group discussion about challenges and opportunities for sourcing local produce.

#### 1:00 to 2:00 - More Networking Time

Attendees are free to continue meeting with each other in the room.



Small group networking is an excellent option, especially if your meeting includes produce farmers who do not have experience setting up exhibitor tables. At our Local Produce for Foodservice meeting in March of 2013 (see pictures, left), we labeled seats “buyer” or “supplier.” We put three of each type at a table, in addition to a seventh “facilitator” seat. Every 20 minutes attendees stood up and picked a new table at random. The facilitator remained at their tables, however. Their role was to ensure everyone at the table had a chance to speak and they kept the conversation focused on business.



Offering free time at the end of a meeting is also helpful for people that met during the day and want to have a longer discussion.

Don't underestimate the importance of keeping attendees comfortable - keep everyone well-fed and caffeinated throughout the meeting.

### **Expectations and Follow Up**

It may take buyers and sellers many face-to-face meetings over the course of several years before a sale occurs. Keep in mind that if a buyer or seller makes even one connection that becomes a sale, it is a success as that relationship that may last many years and lead to thousands of dollars of sales. It is also important to help both buyers and sellers not feel discouraged if they did not make sales right away. Again, it can take several meetings for a sale to occur, and follow up on both ends is essential. Contact attendees after the meeting and ask if they need assistance with follow up.

Some sellers may learn from speaking with buyers that large volume sales are not currently the right market for them. That may feel discouraging, but actually, it means the meeting has helped a small business learn something about the market and make a decision that will ultimately save them time and money.

### **Track Results**

As you periodically follow up with attendees, ask about sales that have come out of the meeting, and do a formal survey at the end of the season. Having sales numbers to point to helps illustrate how local food helps our economy, and will also show the value of your program.

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**[www.ifmwi.org](http://www.ifmwi.org)**

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