

Report On the 2011 SEMAP DOT Survey



- (1) Overview
- (2) Goals
- (3) Method
- (4) What is a DOT Survey
- (5) Experimental Errors
- (6) Testing
- (7) Results
- (8) Conclusions
- (9) Future Applications

Overview

The Southeast Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership (SEMAP) is an NGO which works to promote small scale, local agriculture and increase the consumption of locally produced goods. In order to further these objectives a survey of consumer habits was carried out using the DOT survey technique in several local Farmers Markets over the between June and August of 2011. The results of this suggest several conclusions, most importantly that word of mouth and local papers still play a more dominant role than web-based organizing, and that a significant number of farmer's market attendees would increase their local purchases if more information on where to purchase it were readily available.

Goals

The goal of the DOT surveys was to gauge public opinion of several topics central to SEMAP goals for the area. Specific goals included:

- (1) To measure the popular awareness of a new local food logo into purchasing habits in the region
- (2) To find out more about Farmers Market advertising techniques and;
- (3) To investigate popular opinion on the obstructions and incentives involved in increasing locally produced food.

My expectations for the results were as follows: I anticipated a modest amount of logo recognition, given the fairly recent introduction of the logo. I expected a dominant amount of advertising would come from electronic marketing (i.e. Facebook groups, market newsletters, etc.). I also expected that price would be a primary issue in consumers purchasing habits, given the widespread perception of organic and non-industrial produced food and goods as artisanal, luxury items. Additionally, I thought seasonal availability and lack of local food locations to be significant factors.

Method

To accomplish these goals I modified a previous set of questions used in an earlier DOT survey, in consultation with Sarah Cogswell. I then collected data from four different locations over the course of the summer. The questions were written as follows:

- What most prevents you from purchasing more local food?
 - price
 - seasonal availability
 - lack of locations
 - lack of information
- How do you find out about local food markets and event/activities?
 - newspaper/magazine
 - email newsletter
 - fliers/posters
 - word of mouth
- Has this label helped you to purchase more locally-grown products?
 - the label has helped me to increase my purchases
 - the label has not helped me to increase my purchases
 - I have not seen this label before today

- Of the actions listed below, which is the SINGLE most important thing that could be done to increase your purchases of locally-grown products?
 - provide more products year round
 - provide more info on where to find it
 - better labeling in stores
 - increase the variety
 - more info on benefits of buying local

What is a DOT Survey?

The DOT survey technique is a simple method for quickly obtaining data in public locations, which works exactly as it sounds. After wording the questions to be as clear as possible, each option is written on a poster board with a column for each response. Respondents then place a dot in the column that best reflects their response. Ideally, respondents will give one response per question. The survey thus takes very little time, increasing the number of respondents. The downside of the method is the informal and unscientific nature of the collection, which leaves the DOT survey open to critique. DOT surveys should not be viewed highly reliable, but are excellent for roughly gauging public opinion.

Experimental Errors

Several aspects of the DOT technique should lead us to question the results obtained by it. Firstly, it is not a “blind” survey, in that the responses of other participants are in full view of the respondents, which creates the possibility for peer pressure and inaccurate responses. Groupthink in such a situation is not uncommon, and this could color some of the data. Specifically, the first answer of the first question (price is a factor in my purchasing habits), is one which many might feel uncomfortable responding with in an extremely public setting.

A second potential error in this DOT survey was selection bias in the group polled. It is highly plausible that a gulf exists between attendees of Farmers Markets and the great mass of people not currently attending them, the group that SEMAP targets for awareness campaigns. For example, while the data reflects that few respondents think more information on the benefits of buying local would be helpful, this may be because they already have a better understanding of such benefits than the average consumer.

The phrasing of a question and the list of responses can and in this case was problematic for a small but significant number of respondents. Many respondents wished to give multiple answers for each question (and some did), while some others felt their response was not an option. This included an extremely small number of people who felt that nothing could be done to increase their purchases of local food.

Sample size is a potential issue for this particular DOT survey, as the number of locations it was conducted at was significantly smaller than originally intended. Due to the spontaneous failure of both of the cars I had access to, I was unable to attend an additional three markets, which would have allowed a greater measure of confidence in the results. As is, I believe the 200 plus responses gathered constitute a large enough group to draw accurate conclusions from.

Testing

The survey was carried out at four Farmers Markets in southeast Massachusetts: Attleboro, Scituate, Carver, and Westport. The market coordinators were both kind and accommodating at all of the venues, and I thank them for helping make the surveys successful. Attleboro has just reopened their market at a new location this year, and the responses from that location are perhaps the most applicable for question number two (how do you find out about local food markets and event/activities).

Results

What Most Prevents You from purchasing more local Food?	
Price	7
Seasonal Availability	84
Lack of Locations	83
Lack of info	34
How Do You find out about local food markets, events, and activities?	
newspaper/mag	56
email	
newspaper/Facebook	38
fliers/posters	36
word of mouth	76
Has this label helped you purchase more locally grown products	
yes	78
no	28

haven't seen	98
What is the most imp. Thing that could help increase your purchases	
more year round products	80
more info on locations	79
better store labeling	28
increase variety	13
more info on the benefits of buying local	5

By Location:

What Most Prevents You from purchasing more local Food?		Attleboro
Price	0	
Seasonal Availability	28	
Lack of Locations	47	
Lack of info	20	95

How Do You find out about local food markets, events, and activities?		
newspaper/mag	29	
email		
newspaper/Facebook	24	
fliers/posters	10	
word of mouth	32	95

Has this label helped you purchase more locally grown products		
yes	28	
no	10	
haven't seen	52	91

What is the most imp. Thing that could help increase your purchases		
more year round products	33	
more info on locations	41	
better store labeling	12	
increase variety	11	
more info on the benefits of buying local	0	97

What Most Prevents You from purchasing more local Food?		Pembroke
Price	1	
Seasonal Availability	6	
Lack of Locations	7	
Lack of info	3	17

How Do You find out about local food markets, events, and activities?		
newspaper/mag	9	

email newspaper/Facebook	4	
fliers/posters	2	
word of mouth	1	16
Has this label helped you purchase more locally grown products		
yes	10	
no	2	
haven't seen	4	16
What is the most imp. Thing that could help increase your purchases		
more year round products	6	
more info on locations	7	
better store labeling	3	
increase variety	0	
more info on the benefits of buying local	1	17

What Most Prevents You from purchasing more local Food?		Westport
Price		3
Seasonal Availability		31
Lack of Locations		12
Lack of info		10
		56

How Do You find out about local food markets, events, and activities?		
newspaper/mag	11	
email newspaper/Facebook	6	
fliers/posters	16	
word of mouth	25	58

Has this label helped you purchase more locally grown products		
yes	29	
no	10	
haven't seen	15	54

What is the most imp. Thing that could help increase your purchases		
more year round products	26	
more info on locations	18	
better store labeling	7	
increase variety	2	
more info on the benefits of buying local	0	53

What Most Prevents You from purchasing more local Food?		Scituate
Price		3
Seasonal Availability		19
Lack of Locations		15
Lack of info		1
		38

How Do You find out about local food markets, events, and activities?		
newspaper/mag	7	
email newspaper/Facebook	4	
fliers/posters	8	
word of mouth	18	37
Has this label helped you purchase more locally grown products		
yes	11	
no	2	
haven't seen	27	40
What is the most imp. Thing that could help increase your purchases		
more year round products	15	
more info on locations	13	
better store labeling	6	
increase variety	0	
more info on the benefits of buying local	4	38

Conclusions

There are several conclusions which can be drawn from the data. Assuming the data is an accurate representation of local food purchasers, the new local food logo has been successful in gaining consumer recognition. More than a third of respondents reported they had found the logo useful, a respectable number. Scituate has the lowest rate of recognition, perhaps because it was the furthest north of the markets polled.

Advertising for Farmers Markets still relies much more heavily on word of mouth and local papers than I expected. Since the Attleboro market was polled on the day of its grand reopening, I believed that it would show the greatest use of online organizing and marketing. While their website and online presence is impressive, online marketing still ranked third overall and in Attleboro. This should serve as a reminder of the importance of the former methods of market promotion, not a rebuke of online marketing.

Two answers accounted for the bulk of responses on the questions about buying habits. The seasonal availability of local products and a lack of knowledge about locations to buy local accounted for more than three quarters of responses. We should question the applicability of these findings though, because there is a fairly widespread narrative of local and organic as elitist which was not reflected in the

results. This is most likely because the people who believe local food to be expensive do not go to Farmers Markets. Similarly, people already attending Farmers Markets do not think they need more education on why to buy local (only five believed more info on the benefits of buying local would increase their purchases). This should not be taken to mean that increasing education would yield poor results.

Future Applications of DOT testing

While this survey gives a good snapshot of public opinion at Farmers Markets, it does not include a broad enough swath of people. The most relevant data for SEMAP might be gained by conducting such surveys in places not already predisposed to local food, such as outside of supermarkets and big box stores. A comparative series of surveys in Farmers Markets and at Costco's and Stop and Shop's in the region could produce highly usable information while informing a wider swath of the public. Testing in the winter at year round farmers markets could also remove the variable of seasonal availability, getting a different and perhaps useful response from a dedicated group of local food purchasers SEMAP would presumably aim to increase.



Photo courtesy of Attleboro Farmers Market, July 2nd 2011. <http://attleborofarmersmarket.com/page/14/>

This survey was carried out with SEMAP materials in my capacity as a summer intern there, with the support of the Farmers Market Coordinators of the towns listed.

-Theodore Jordan Sweetser, 10/4/11