

What is Sprouts?

Sprouts is a program aimed at encouraging children between the ages of 4 and 12 to embrace healthy eating. A huge benefit of shopping at a local farmers' market is having access to fresh, nutrient dense, picked-at-its-peak, fresh local food. Our program empowers children by allowing them to make their own choices about the food they purchase, within healthy, nutrition-minded guidelines.

Further to that goal, the Sprouts program facilitates families cooking together and preparing meals at home. It helps parents teach their children to have fun and to be involved in preparing meals at home to set them on the road to nutritional, healthy lifestyle success by sharing nutritional information and by sending out weekly recipes that feature market-fresh ingredients that are designed with children in mind. We also want to encourage parents and children to gather together around a family meal.

What are our Marketing Goals for the Program?

1. Improve traffic to our market.

This program encourages families to come to the market on a regular basis. It also acts as an incentive to come to our market to shop in bad weather.

2. Increase vendor sales.

If children are purchasing an item with their token, there's a good chance that their parents will top up their purchases there as well. Further, if the vendors engage in conversations with the Sprouts and their families, they cement a relationship with those customers. If the vendors offer special deals to the Sprouts kids, they earn the loyalty of the Sprouts parents, and build a solid customer base for themselves. And if the vendors take the opportunity to teach their customers about food prep, or help these customers establish a connection to the land and to their food, their customers will be more committed to purchasing fresh, local fruits and veggies on a regular basis.

3. Attract media attention.

A program like this that encourages children and families to eat nutritiously makes for a feel-good story. It has great visuals... from the cute tokens to the adorable children and a fun logo. And as a result, it makes our market more visible on the farmers' market landscape and sets it apart from others that are simply a place of commerce. It is also easier to write stories about a program like this for community newspapers that do not feel like a self-promoting advertisement for the market itself.

4. Increase our ability to leverage funding.

It is easier to access grants and to attract sponsorship money when you have a program that involves children, nutrition, community, and education.

How does Sprouts work for the children?

1. Children check in at the Sprouts tent.

The children receive a wooden Sprouts token that we have made and branded, along with a recipe card.

Sprouts tokens can ONLY be spent on fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, and food plants. At first, this seems unfair to other vendors, in particular the ones who make homemade foods. But it was easier to implement this way. Vendors who cannot participate in the program still see their sales increase by the increased number of shoppers coming to market to get their tokens, and by the focus on nutrition, homemade food and home cooking that is inherent in the program. Our recipe program, explained later in this document, also supports other vendors in our market by featuring their products. We've also developed a funding strategy to allow vendors and non-market businesses to "sponsor" recipes in order to fund the program.

2. Children look for the Sprouts Signs.

Each vendor has a colourful, visible sign that is distributed by volunteers at the beginning of every market. The children look for these signs and spend their tokens at the Sprouts vendors.

3. Children to check back in at the Sprouts table on their way out

We have the children check out every week to share what they have purchased with their token. This is an effective way to build relationships with the young families who come to market, and to help validate the choices that the children are making along the road to healthy eating. It is one of the ways that we can make the experience a positive one for children, while helping to support parents in their attempts to raise their kids in a nutritionally mindful way.

How does Sprouts work for the vendors?

1. Vendors are encouraged to be creative in their participation in the program.

Our most successful vendors are the ones who made up items especially for the sprouts children: S4 Greenhouses and Holden made up little bags of coloured mini tomatoes and mini cucumbers; Steve & Dan's BC Fruit made up plastic cups with a pear or an apple in them, topped with cherries or berries that were in season; Red Apple and AIG made up mixed mini baskets of fruit.

These easy-to-grab items were deals made especially for Sprouts, and a research study from the University of Alberta demonstrated that vendors that marketed to children received 26 more tokens per market, on average, than vendors who did not create items for children, regardless of the type of produce (fruit or vegetable) sold.

2. Participating vendors attach a Sprouts sign to their display.

It should be eye-catching and very visual for the kids who cannot yet read to know, at a glance, that this is where they can spend their tokens. We had ours printed on 8x8" coroplast so they could hold up to the elements and they are clamped into the tent legs using simple spring clamps.

3. At the end of the evening, our Sprouts Coordinator or Market Manager collect the tokens and record the number received by each vendor.

We reimburse vendors monthly via cheque. The interesting thing about this is that you can track who the more successful vendors are, and you can start to see patterns that underlie their success. The vendors are very interested in these stats, and it allows for opportunities to discuss with them things that they can do to enhance their sales and to meet their customers' needs.

What do you need to get the program off the ground?

1. Do your research

Listen to the webinars by the Southwest Edmonton Farmers' Market and the Oregon City Farmers' Market linked on our website.

Study your market's particular demographic. Perhaps unlike our child-saturated market, yours has a lot of seniors, or people on fixed or limited incomes. Adaptability is key. The program experience can be altered to suit the mixed nature and character of your market. It is really important that you know what that is. Who comes? Why do they come? What are their gaps in knowledge about the local food system? Where do they need help eating, shopping and living a healthier life? Are there gaps in their nutritional knowledge?

Set your own unique goals that reflect a recognition of the needs and issues that are important to your shoppers. It is in your hands to adapt the program to reflect the true character of your market. What does your market hopes to achieve with a program like this?

2. Purchase Your Supplies

The supplies we recommend for the implementation of the program are below:

- Tokens (durable, made of wood, metal or plastic)
- Reusable Bags (1/child when they register for the program, or on a first come, first-served basis to the first participants)
- Record sheet to gather statistics (what they purchased, how many sprouts checked in)
- A source of recipes (terrific photos and child friendly colours are essential)
- A sandwich board so children know where to come to register
- Signs for participating vendor stalls
- Cheques for monthly reimbursement or cash float to reimburse vendors at the end of the market day

Token Value and Design:

Since designing and producing the tokens can be a complicated process, below is a brief explanation of our Sprouts tokens:

Each tile is worth \$2 but we did not put the value on the surface of the token: this allows us to determine each year what its value will be and does not tie us into a price point that is too steep

or too cheap to work, year after year. You need to have extra tokens on hand because some kids save their tokens to be used at a later date for larger purchases, and we have had a “leakage” of around 5-10% every market where tokens are not returned. You need a method of accounting in place to keep track of these outstanding tokens.

The tiles are made from reclaimed wood that is ¼” thick x 2” x 3” made by a market volunteer who donated his time, labour and the wood itself. A graphic designer came up with the logo and also donated her time. She designed the info posters , the shopping bags and the advertising post cards. We had a high school student volunteer design the token using the logo and PhotoShop in his Applied Graphic Arts option class at school and he designed the sign for the info booth with the sponsors’ names on it. The vector file of the token design was then sent to *Norcraft Custom Branding Irons* in the U.S. (<http://www.brandingequipment.com>). They came recommended by *Lee Valley Tools* and made a very top-quality branding iron for us and we highly recommend their workmanship. It gets incredibly hot, allowing us to make a Sprouts token every 2 seconds. The extra cost was well worth it and the iron arrived in about 10 days’ time. Branding is a very simple task.

3. Fulfill Other Program Needs

- A discussion with vendors to come up with a roster of vendors who are willing to participate
- People who can recruit sponsors and obtain funding
- People who can search out and apply for government and private business grants (this is exceptionally time consuming!)
- Advertising (this can come in the form of articles written for community newspapers or through social media)
- Advertising Posters

4. Source Manpower Hours

Admittedly, we spent many hours researching the program, having brainstorming meetings, tracking down suppliers for things like printing, branding and signage... all to get the idea of this program off the ground. And we spent countless hours finding and applying for grants, many of which were rejected. Then there were the meetings with potential sponsors and presentations to community groups for funds to fuel the program.

We cannot emphasize enough that without adequate funding, this program is a major headache to get off the ground. Our board went to Community Leagues and organizations doing presentations on the Sprouts program. Our Sprouts Coordinator worked tirelessly filling out grants. We wrote many articles to go in the community papers about the program, as we did not have the budget to pay for advertising.

While we did not keep track of the hours we invested in the program, here is our best guess:

- Obtaining Sponsorships (presentations and recruitment emails): 30-50 hours
- Writing and researching grants: 30 hours
- Brainstorming Meetings: (at board level and between key board members with the market manager) 10 hours+

- Logo Design: 2 hours
- Creating the Branding Iron Design: 1 hour
- Developing Signage for the table: 2 hours
- Creating Posters, Sprouts Signs for Vendors, Bag designs, Passports: 10 hours
- Vendor Info Meeting: 1 hour
- Writing an info newsletter to the vendors about the program: 2 hours
- Writing Newspaper Articles before and during market season: 20 hours
- Developing Website Content: 10 hours
- Stuffing Bags (given at registration): 2 hours
- Making the tokens: 4 hours plus 2 hours branding time
- Manning the Sprouts table: 2 volunteers @ 4hrs/week or 4 volunteers doing 2 hr shifts/ week x 22 weeks
- Writing content for the website: 30 minutes/week x 22 weeks
- Writing & developing recipes: 1-2 hour/week x 22 weeks

What did we learn in our first year?

Initially the program was exceptionally popular. Registration day saw huge lineups and all 200 of our spots went.

The kids who participated in the program loved it, but that wasn't enough to get them to come to market every week, rain or shine. Though we had 200 tokens on site each week to hand out, we often got no more than 77 kids coming to claim their tokens... even after opening up the program to 350 children (those extra 150 spots went in a market and a half). Clearly people were motivated to sign their children up, but it was not enough to sustain across the board steady, regular, weekly participation.

This could be because families take summer holidays and don't make it to market regularly. It could be that because ours is a weekday market, kids are involved in after school activities. At this point we don't know the answer to this conundrum. But we know, going forward, that we can safely open it up to more children than we have funding to cover.

Clearly people love the idea of Sprouts. Parents talk about it. Blog posts about it are shared. Facebook posts are shared and "liked." There is a lot of good will out there toward the program.

This program was an easy program for both sponsors and media outlets to love. CTV did a feature on the market. Blog posts about our Sprouts program are our most read posts in our 4-year history. New sponsors came on board to the market because of this program. It was an idea, far greater than simply the concept of "community," that they could wrap their heads around.

This program demonstrated to our market shoppers that we take health and nutrition, and the health of their children, seriously. We began to build a reputation of helping parents to raise their children, of having the parent's backs in their struggles to raise their kids in nutritionally mindful ways. It generated a lot of good will toward our market's reputation within its local community.

The vendors loved it. They began doing unique things, just for our market. Most importantly, what this meant for us, is that they were thinking of our market as separate and apart from all markets. And they were doing things that specifically targeted our demographic... making the

market experience for shoppers better and more successful for the vendors themselves. Even our inflatable slide guy said to us one day, "I go to many markets and at all of them, I see children stuffing themselves with sugar. This market is different. The parents here are different. They really seem to care about what their children put into their mouths."

The dedicated sprouts children that come each week really benefit from their participation in our program. And that alone makes it worthwhile. If we can help to change the direction of a young life and teach an emphasis on healthy living and be a part of establishing a routine around healthy eating, then it has done its job well.