

# Effective Communications in the Cultural Marketplace

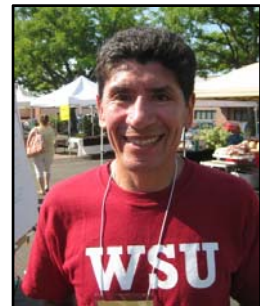
Chapter 6: Happy Vendors, Happy Managers

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Communicating with your market staff, volunteers, board members, farmers, crafters, prepared food vendors, processors, community partners, musicians, shoppers, City officials, Health Department staff, WIC clinic outreach workers, federal food program officials, WSDA regulators, and customer service representatives for your wireless equipment can be hard work. We each speak a slightly different language born of our own unique perspective and professional culture. Add to this the ever-growing *means* of communicating and it's a wonder we connect at all. Letters seem obsolete and even the days of simply calling someone or emailing seem to be fading. Now we're on to texting or tweeting or posting and pinging.

If we add the need to communicate with people who didn't grow up speaking English, who rely on verbal (as opposed to written) communication, and bring a relationship-based (as opposed to a more formal and rules oriented) perspective to business and money, then things can get downright complicated. In this section, **Dr. José L. García-Pabón**, with WSU Extension and Latino Community Studies, provides practical suggestions on how to improve our cross-cultural communication skills. While his examples are based on his research and experience with Latino farmers, the principles may also apply to the many other immigrant and non-western cultures we experience in our markets from vendors to staff, volunteers, board members, and shoppers.



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## The Power of Perceptions

We all have certain perceptions and ideas about the world we live in, including people. Consciously and unconsciously, our brain creates expectations about how people will behave and react to situations in order to make sense of things. The flip side of this, for better or worse, is that others create expectations about how we will behave and react too. Often such expectations are based on features such as gender, height, race, age,

where you live, how you speak, how you dress, or if you can name four varieties of heirloom tomatoes or not.

One of the first steps to communicating cross-culturally is to reflect on our perceptions of immigrant farmers. Do you think of them as shy or outgoing? Do you know if they have had a lot or very little formal education? Do you feel you can communicate well in English or are you uncertain as to whether or not you were understood? Do these farmers seem to understand and follow your market rules? There is no “right answer.” The goal is to think about what assumptions we bring into our communication. The next step is to learn about “why” these perceptions are common and what they might mean culturally. What assumptions should we revisit or even change? Each vendor-manager relationship is unique but the more you get to know people, the more you acquire a nuanced understanding of who they are as an individual and as a member of a larger cultural group.

## The Iceberg Concept of Culture

To help us understand the “why’s” of certain cultural concepts, we can use the metaphor of an iceberg. There are the bits of an iceberg above the surface that we can all see, but there is a whole lot more underneath that we cannot see. Both what is seen and what is unseen has a profound effect on our behaviors, reactions, and attitudes. Following our metaphor, “above the surface” are fairly straightforward customs, social mores, and traditional courtesies that are fairly easy to pick up on. “Below the surface,” are internalized cultural values, priorities, and assumptions.



Source: [www.cross-culture.de/intercultural\\_coaching.htm](http://www.cross-culture.de/intercultural_coaching.htm)

For example, you may notice an immigrant farmer coming late to set up his/her booth and staying longer -- selling or talking with customers -- after the market closes. To you, it may seem disrespectful not to follow the rules which clearly state, in writing, that the farmers market starts at certain time and ends at certain time. Perhaps the street permit only gives you an hour to clean up or selling after the market closes may create a safety hazard.

However, from this farmer’s perspective, the notion of time is flexible and it would be impolite to stop a conversation or a sale with a customer.

## High Context and Low Context Cultures

A second concept that is useful in understanding how cultures work is based on the work of the famous anthropologist Edward T. Hall. He described cultures as either being “high context” or “low context.” These two terms refer to how people communicate. High context suggests that people look for and derive most of their meaning from “the context” that they are in at the time. Think of being in a place you know well, maybe a farmers market or your hometown. You don’t need signs or anyone to tell you what is going on. You know simply by seeing who is there and what they are doing.

Furthermore, high context societies are more relationship-oriented; communication is less formal and less to the point, without a clear delineation between what is business and what is personal. If someone comes from a high context culture, then relationships may take precedence over values like punctuality. In other words, it may be more important to be polite than to be on time. The degree to which a country is “high context” typically falls along a continuum. Arab and Far-Eastern countries may be clearly high context while others may be high context, but less pronounced (e.g. France and some Latin American countries). While countries may have a dominant trait, countries with a lot of diversity will have both high and low context cultures co-exist (e.g., the United States is predominantly low context, Native American communities are high context).

In a low context culture, ways of behaving and expectations are explicitly spelled out or formally prescribed and are far less personal. Think of an airport or going into a public library. The dominant expectation is that communication will be direct, straight to the point, concise, and stick to the business at hand. Punctuality is highly valued and detailed plans and agreements are put in writing and signed. The United States, Australia, Germany, Great Britain, and Scandinavian countries are some examples of societies that tend to be low context.

	Low Context	High Context
<b>The Structure of Relationships</b>	Loose, wide networks, shorter term, task more important than relationship	Dense, intersecting networks and long term and strong relationships, relationship more important than task
<b>Main Type of Cultural Knowledge</b>	More knowledge is <u>above the waterline</u> --explicit, consciously organized	More knowledge is <u>below the waterline</u> --implicit, patterns that are not fully conscious and are hard to explain
<b>Form of Communication</b>	Rule oriented, people play by external and clearly written rules. More knowledge is codified, public, external, and accessible	Less verbally explicit communication, less written/formal information

## Practical Tools

### Communicate in person

It is important to get an idea of how familiar your immigrant farmers are with the “system.” For instance, if your vendor has only been farming for a few years, it might be his/her first season at a farmers market. In this case the farmer will need more time to learn and comply with rules and expectations. Another key aspect in cross cultural communication is to try and say important things in a personal way. In other words, try to present invitations and/or requests in person, preferably face-to-face or at least over the phone. It may take more time, but you’ll have better results. Another strategy to improve compliance with rules is to find and use “allies” such as more experienced farmers or other vendors who can mentor the new farmers. Allies may also be found within the farmer’s family.

### Translation

For most market managers, working with non-English speaking vendors raises some tricky communication challenges. It may be important to work with a skilled translator to make sure that details are being communicated and ensure the use of culturally appropriate translations. For instance, the word “eater” cannot be translated literally to “comedor” since “comedor” means “dining room”.

### Everyday practices

*Suspend judgment.* Never assume that because one immigrant farmer behaved a certain way that others will do so. Also remember that some may feel vulnerable because of documentation issues and be suspicious of efforts to share information or engage with “authorities” (market managers, health department inspectors, etc.).

*Live with uncertainty.* Give vendors the benefit of the doubt. Immigrant farmers want to develop friendly relationships with managers and other vendors. Any “unusual” behavior does not mean that a farmer has a hidden agenda.

*Assess your vendor’s needs but also assess your own resources and what you can and can’t offer.* Be honest about it. Everybody appreciates honesty and immigrant farmers are not any exception.

*Question any quick answers and remedies.* In cross-cultural communication there is no such thing as a quick fix. Remember that cross-cultural communication is a long term learning process and commitment for all involved. You learn from your vendors and they learn from you.

*Emphasize the positive, before bringing up any kind of criticism or questioning.* A person from a high cultural context to whom relationships are very important may feel really hurt or offended if a farmers market manager starts a conversation with a criticism.

Critiques are better received if you begin with something nice and then you express your concerns.

*Be patient; building a relationship doesn't happen overnight.* Trust is the basis of a relationship in any culture, but it's more so in high context cultures. Building a trusting relationship, no matter how long it takes, it will pay off for your farmers market, you and your vendor.

*Show them you care!* Nothing will help more in building a trusting relationship than showing that you truly care for your vendors as a group and as individuals.

## Resources

### Pike Place Market

- Leigh Newman-Bell, Farm Development Coordinator  
Pike Place Market  
(360) 605-8424 or Leigh.newman-bell@pikeplacemarket.org

### WSU Small Farms Team Immigrant Farmer Program

Please visit: <http://smallfarms.wsu.edu/immigrant-farmers/>

- Kate Smith, Northwest Small Latino Farms Educator (*and former market manager*)  
WSU Small Farms Program/Skagit County Extension  
(360) 428-4270, Ext. 223 or kate.selting@wsu.edu

### “Communicating with Latino Farmers: Cultural Aspects and Strategies”

By José García-Pabón and Marcia Ostrom, 2015.

<http://cru.cahe.wsu.edu/CEPublications/FS191E/FS191E.pdf>

¡Venda más! Guía para mejorar su puesto en el Mercado Agrícola

(Sell More! The Vendor Booth Guide for Farmers Markets)

<http://smallfarms.wsu.edu/marketing/>

“Resources for Spanish-speaking Farmers” in Washington

WSDA 2012 “Green Book”

<http://agr.wa.gov/marketing/smallfarm/greenbook/2.aspx>