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## greenpaper [grēn-pā-per] -noun

1. a document that shares with those interested in the field of public markets marketumbrella.org's findings and learnings as practitioners
2. statements by marketumbrella.org, not of policy or practices already determined, but of propositions for discussion
3. produced for the policymaking process, they hope to inform interested parties on specific topics in a brief, easy-to-digest format

## Lessons from Festivus | a holiday market for the rest of us

### Executive Summary

*Festivus, marketumbrella.org's "holiday market for the rest of us," was a five-year experiment in producing a sustainable, fair-trade holiday craft market that succeeded in becoming a cultural highpoint for the New Orleans region. In keeping with marketumbrella.org's mission and values, Festivus also raised awareness of social justice principles such as living wage environmental product sourcing and recycling/ reuse. It also championed local skills and services and was the inspiration for a number of open-air artist markets that have since blossomed in the region.*

Our experience producing Festivus taught us a number of valuable lessons—the most fundamental being the demonstration that the same principles by which we produce the Crescent City Farmers Market could be applied to non-food products and services with equally happy results. Vendors and shoppers alike valued Festivus for the financial and social capital it generated: \$600,000 in direct and indirect economic impact the first year alone, and anguished cries of disappointment and protest from all quarters



*cultivating the field of public markets for public good*

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when we announced we would no longer be producing it. As a social event, Festivus exceeded expectations and was enjoyed by hip browsers and quality time-sharing families alike.

That said, we also learned that it is more difficult to continually build trust and diversify vendors and shoppers with an event that occurs annually instead of one that works every week as the Crescent City Farmers Market does. That realization became the bell to answer: is this the best way for our small organization to help artists and our sister markets?

We ultimately decided that Festivus had become an example of mission drift. We were producing Festivus because it was fun and we were good at it,

but it wasn't in fulfillment of our post-Katrina mission, which is to grow markets. Further, we have realized that a more productive role for marketumbrella.org is to be available as a resource in support of all the other art and craft markets that have since sprung up in our area. In that role, we can be of assistance all year long rather than just on three Saturdays in December. We may also move them to consider fair trade and sustainability issues, as well as help become better vendors and businesspeople. We even envision setting up our own booth at these other markets to offer assistance in the form of credit- and debit-card enabling tokens and other technical assistance.

### **The birth of Festivus: a holiday market for the rest of us**

On December 3, 2003, long-time shoppers of the Crescent City Farmers Market came to the corner of Magazine and Girod with more on their mind than just the greens, shrimp and milk they usually picked up at their weekly farmers market. They also came to experience the first "Festivus, a holiday market for the rest of us"—the newest project of marketumbrella.org. Held concurrently on the closed-off block of Girod next to the Saturday farmers market,

the event took place over three Saturdays filled with shopping, promenading, and building community for the holiday gift-buying crowd.

As promoters of the open-air market culture, marketumbrella.org staff members had long been buttonholed into conversations about assisting other artisans besides farmers. Couldn't artists also benefit from the thousand-plus shoppers that showed up every week to buy local food? Would it be possible to link artists and farmers at one event; do their needs coincide?

The term "Festivus," sprang from an episode of the iconic television sitcom, *Seinfeld*, in which a character invents the holiday to protest the consumer madness that has come to characterize the mainstream winter holidays. The episode quickly became a viral hit, with groups holding their own Festivus celebrations throughout the world, borrowing traditions drawn directly from the sitcom storyline, such as Grievance Poles, Feats of Strength, and No Tinsel. In 2003, when marketumbrella.org came to name our first foray into a non-food market, the idea to attach it to the Festivus concept was irresistible. Festivus offered everyone a non-denominational holiday event and was a playful, fun name for everyone to remember.

In considering whether or not to sponsor a non-food market, we first needed to determine whether a market like Festivus fell within the bounds of our mission, which at the time was “to initiate and promote the ecology of local economies.” Certainly, we had seen other farmers markets sponsor successful additions: for example, the Red Stick Market’s monthly craft market in Baton Rouge, held next to their open-air farmers market. Also, the Bywater Art Market had successfully pioneered a regional monthly art market the year before in a downtown neighborhood of New Orleans. So marketumbrella.org staff had no question about the interest from artists; instead:

- Were we ready to stretch our market concept beyond local food?
- Would our constituents (farmers and fishers, neighbors, long-time shoppers) want us to add another market?
- Could we curate something that could change the way people shop for the holidays—i.e., the chain store, mass-market culture?
- Could we bridge unlikely communities, as we were doing with CCFM, such as rural and urban, elderly and hip, affluent and cost-conscious?



In keeping with our mission and the value we place on sustainability, one of our goals for Festivus was to get people thinking about the sustainability of the entire supply chain for non-food products. For that reason, we felt it was necessary to include fair trade goods and recycled and ecological goods and services. Reuse of materials was an honored New Orleans tradition and would allow a more diverse group of artists to be involved in Festivus and fair trade was a perfect way to introduce the responsibility of buying raw materials from outside of the region (meaning products whose producers received a living wage, enjoyed decision-making power, and used sustainably manufactured raw goods). We created a vendor application that could be downloaded from our website and that explained the different vendor “channels,” noting that we reserved a certain amount of spaces yearly for each type of

product or service.

The Festivus committee met in late October every year to review each application. The staff showed slides or distributed product samples to each committee member, who gave their opinion on the quality of the items and the ability of the applicant to tell the story of their creation.

By far, the majority of vendors chosen were talented local artisans: woodworkers, ceramicists, glassblowers, metalworkers, jewelry makers, photographers, soap makers, candle makers, and textile artists. Recycled/ecological products included art from scrap, vintage clothing, refurbished bicycles, and unique items that put recycled materials to new uses. Fair trade offerings included the Louisiana Himalaya Association, which sold items made by Tibetan refugees in Northern India, sending the income back

to them. Skilled services ranged from massages to gift-wrapping; bicycle repair to the popular “learn a skill” corner, where at various times shoppers could learn how to juggle, tie a tie, or make compost.

We held a meeting with each



year’s vendors right before the first Festivus of the season to explain the organization behind the market, the marketing strategy, why we encouraged more use of recycled materials, and how to follow fair trade paper trails. The meeting also allowed vendors to understand the logistics of the market setup, and to ask questions about the wooden token system that is used at all [marketumbrella.org](http://marketumbrella.org) markets.

As a result of all of the planning, strategy sessions and meetings, the first “Festivus, a holiday market for the rest of us” opened

in December 2003 with more than three dozen artisans and trades people found through the previous six months of emails, PSAs, and word of mouth advertising. All of the work seemed well worth it: on opening day, more than two thousand people showed up to walk, shop and enjoy Festivus—staying for hours and making those chosen vendors some of the happiest people in the city that season.

Since the purely commercial aspects of big box chain stores were to be combated, Festivus also included food, live music and cocktails, a Grievance Pole for the voicing and releasing of complaints; a ReGifting station, for the exchange of gifts that had failed to please; free massages, courtesy of the “Office of Homeland Serenity”; live flattery and flattery coupons, distributed by local actors, musicians and, in the last two years, by the crowd-pleasing Big Easy Roller Girls. In keeping with the need to measure results, [marketumbrella.org](http://marketumbrella.org) used its downloadable economic impact tool (SEED) and found the direct and indirect economic effect of Festivus to be over \$600,000. Not bad for a new endeavor.

Festivus’ success in adding color and building community was evident every year, but especially on the one-day Festivus held in 2005 just two

months after Katrina. With most of the city still vacant, with anger and shock still dominating the public mood, it was clear to all who attended that Festivus was the healing balm residents sorely needed. Artists demonstrated their love for the city in their creations, and shoppers were happy to plunk down cash for fleur-de-lis shirts and other colorful local items to replace all that were lost. Certainly, the significance of being able to stay and talk quietly, even to grieve with other residents, was palpable on that sunny day.

Our experience producing Festivus taught us a number of valuable lessons—the most fundamental being that we now knew we could apply the same principles by which we produce the Crescent City Farmers Market to non-food products and services with equally happy results. There is no doubt that Festivus was a fun holiday craft market. As a social place, it exceeded expectations and also added non-commercial activities that were appreciated by hip browsers and families enjoying quality time. But...was Festivus becoming more of a festival than a market?

What’s the difference? We see markets as being regularly occurring public economic events that are integrated into the life of the community

to the extent that people can depend on them—shoppers for goods; vendors for income; and everyone for community. They may be fun, entertaining, even



recreational—that’s how we like them. But that’s not their purpose.

Festivals, on the other hand, are special events. They are entertainment or recreation. You often have to pay to go to them, or at least go to a special venue to experience them. The things you buy or experience at festivals are not regularly available. If you miss one, you can’t catch it next week. As a community member reminded us, “You don’t bring your bags

from home to a festival.”

Festivus was also a type of event that other people were now producing in the wake of Festivus: the Freret Street

Market, the Bayou Boogaloo, the Art Egg Studio Market, the Mid-City Art Market, the Harrison Avenue Marketplace, and the New Orleans Craft Mafia Market. These public markets draw impressive crowds year-round and have created regular retail outlets for many of the fun, funky goods originally offered at Festivus.

We also realized that it is more difficult to continually build trust and diversify vendors and shoppers with an event that

occurs annually instead of one that works every week to fulfill the needs and be part of the “to-do” routines of residents. That realization became the bell to answer: is this the best way for our small organization to help artists and our sister markets?

In other words, marketumbrella.org was beginning to see Festivus as an example of mission drift. We were producing Festivus because it was fun and we were good at it, but it wasn’t in fulfillment

of our evolved post-Katrina mission, which is to grow markets.

We ended up agreeing that a more productive role for marketumbrella.org was to be available to share ideas and resources to these other markets and vendors, rather than add another yearly competing market. In that role, we can be of assistance all year long rather than just on three Saturdays in December. We hope to engage them in conversations about fair trade and sustainability issues. We would love to have a hand in helping artists become better vendors and businesspeople, and helping market organizers with their own particular challenges and questions. We even envision setting up our own booth at these other markets to offer assistance in the form of credit- and debit-card enabling tokens and other technical assistance. Since 2004, the newest way we organize in underserved areas of the region is our peak-season Brigades. We see them as another possible portal for other markets to use: a one-off event to get peak season items (food and non-food) into selected neighborhoods and established markets.

Whatever the decision is on marketumbrella.org’s future work with non-food markets, it is certain that our five years of Festivus in New Orleans

added local fun, wealth, and another vibrant meeting place to leave one's grievances while celebrating our region's unique culture. As one vendor wrote us: "There really is a lot of love in this community for the specialness of Festivus. There may be many other markets now in New Orleans, but none of them had the unique mix of elements that made Festivus a one-of-a-kind event. We will all miss it, and I will be crossing my fingers that marketumbrella.org will figure out a way to make it happen again next year."

We share the love. Although we don't have any plans to resurrect Festivus, we will continue to be open to the

possibility of producing a similar market in a form that better helps us fulfill our current mission, "to cultivate the field of public markets for public good."

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Dedicated to cultivating the field of public markets for public good, we define public markets as "recurring assemblies of vendors marketing goods directly to consumers in a public setting." Learning, sharing and growing, marketumbrella.org cultivates community markets that utilize local resources to bolster authentic local traditions. We believe that ambitious social, health, environmental and financial goals are achieved if trust and respect are present. We envision communities of market umbrellas, like flowers in the field, opening all over the world for the public good.

Founded in 1995 as the Economics Institute and operated under the auspices of Loyola University's Twomey Center for Peace Through Justice until 2008, marketumbrella.org is an independent nonprofit 501(c)3.