



Famous Foods has been open for almost 90 years as an independently owned and operated, bulk and natural foods grocery in Vancouver, B.C. Founded in 1930, their Kingsway location serves as a destination for bulk food shopping as well as a full-service neighbourhood grocery with a loyal customer base. They focus on high quality organic and natural foods that are affordable and cater to a variety of customers. They also stock a number of specialty grocery and baking items that are harder to find in the Lower Mainland. Grocery stores are considered essential businesses and therefore remained open from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic¹. The store faced challenges to remaining open during the pandemic, including how some aspects of sustainability practices were carried out, but also found the silver linings from the situation.

Sustainability Values and Goals

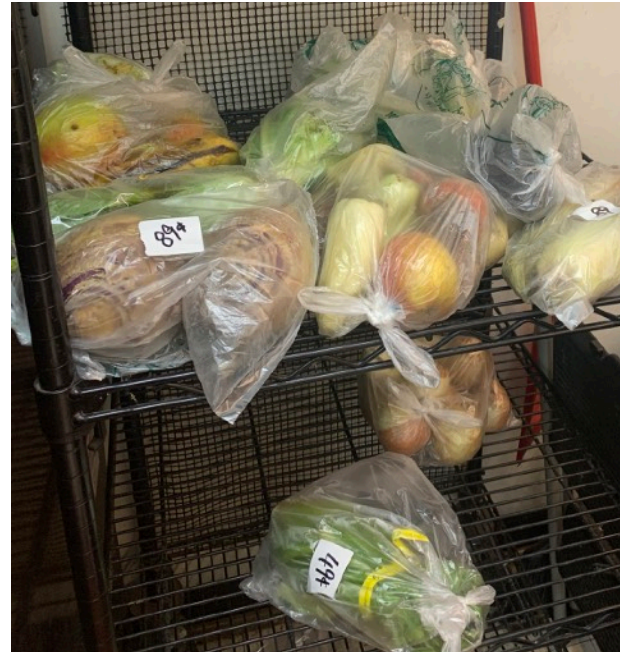
Reducing Food Waste

Famous Foods values sustainability and has made choices to reduce food waste, plastic packaging and facilitate recycling. The store has adapted their effort to achieve these goals, some of which have been challenged during the pandemic. First the store tries to limit wasted food by offering reduced prices for produce that would otherwise get tossed in their organics dumpster. Famous Foods chooses to offer these products at a reduced price to decrease unnecessary spoilage. According to Cam Bruce, the store owner, "if there's product that's maybe starting to go, instead of throwing it we'll put it in a reduced area and sell it off for just pennies." The store has noticed this strategy is popular with customers who use the cheaper produce for juicing and making smoothies or soups because surface level deformities or blemishes don't affect the quality of the output.

¹ Emergency Management BC (EMBC), & Government Communications and Public Engagement (GCPE). (2020, June 12). *List of COVID-19 Essential Services*. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-preparedness-response-recovery/covid-19-provincial-support/essential-services-covid-19>

Alternative Packaging Materials

Another goal for the grocer was to cut down on plastic and non-degradable packaging used by customers and also within the store. The store owner was preparing for compliance with the City's single use reduction bylaw that includes banning plastic bags, but had to renew stock given the pandemic. They keep leftover produce boxes for carry out if customers prefer to use cardboard. The store also has eliminated use of polystyrene in its meat department by opting for fibre-based, certified compostable trays first, and then recyclable plastic trays when the first option was short on supply. Having different types of plastics circulating in the store also meant the store had to improve its in store recycling system to facilitate easier recycling at the back end. This means clearly separating recycled materials into categories such as soft and hard plastics, metals, and organic. "[W]e've reduced a lot of what would go in to just the regular garbage by doing those few things," Cam explained.



Container Returns for Charity

The store also offers deposit return on glass bottles, plastics, aluminium, and other drink containers that are part of the product stewardship Return-It program in B.C. When customers return their eligible drink containers the store pays back a small container deposit. The store in turn receives deposits back from recycling collection which they donate to "United We Can"; an organization which creates economic opportunities through environmental initiatives for people living in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. However, due to COVID-19 they did have to pause the deposit refund system temporarily for all containers except Avalon glass bottles, which have their own separate pick up and reuse program. Avalon bottles are sanitized and reused by the manufacturer, so the deposit system is integral to their production line. Pausing the general container return means that more containers may be going to curbside collection instead of the depot; there is also no longer extra revenue for charity.



Testing Refill Programs

As a longstanding bulk store, Famous Foods carries over 1,500 different bulk food items. Each product is pre-packed by staff in a large warehouse area above the store using clear plastic bags or paper bags for dry goods like flour and grains. This bulk food system functions on a larger scale with significantly more throughput than some of the newer bulk refill stores, which makes it more challenging to shift to a refill approach using customer containers. That said, before the pandemic, the store was testing a customer container drop off refill approach for large quantity harder-to-access products, to support a further reduction in single-use packaging, but had to stop given the pandemic impact. Implementing a container refill program is a potential next pursuit for the store post-COVID-19 to respond to continued requests. In the interim however, an opportunity has arisen to innovate by piloting a laundry and dish soap dispensing machine where customers can request a quantity that aligns with their refillable container.

Challenges and Adaptations to COVID-19



Grocers and food providers were mandated to stay open during the pandemic, so some adjustments were made for managing staffing, supply, cleaning, and store volume. The first change to the store to reduce store hours to better manage staff hours and allow time for restocking and increased cleaning protocols. As of autumn 2020, the store was close to being back to their regular hours; they open 12 hours a day and only close one hour earlier than their pre-pandemic schedule.

Initially, younger staff were harder to retain because there was a fear about spreading the virus back to households and family members. Once more information came out about the rate of transmission and best practices for worker safety, the store was also able to hire back some staff and even hire new workers to supplement the team.

Famous Foods encountered challenges with stocking the range of products customers were accustomed to accessing in the store. Reduced manufacturing capacity meant that the store was unable to order certain products because they weren't being produced or were in short supply. Staff noticed customers were annoyed at times when a specific product was not offered because some producers shifted production to one or two popular items rather than a whole of available choices. "[D]efinitely there's been some frustration on customers' part because customers... [want to] buy what they like," remarked Cam.

Famous Foods aligned cleaning practices with government mandates to be consistent with grocery stores across the board. These practices include wiping down baskets and buggies between uses, installing plastic barriers at tills, cleaning touch points frequently, and overall enhancing sanitization practices. One way this has been helpful for the store is seeing the lack of cleaning protocols necessary for grocery stores in the past. Cam commented, "[I]n a way [when] you think about it... I don't know why these things weren't done before."

To protect customers and staff members alike, the store has also physically restricted the number of customers at one time to less than what is permitted by social distancing guidelines. The government allowance for the space was 50 people but the store decided that 25 was a more appropriate volume to adequately keep distance between people. This decision was made with staff input and also factored in customer feedback. The store did not require masks before the indoor mask mandate put in place in early December 2020, but most customers were already wearing them voluntarily. Considering the limit on in-person shoppers the store hasn't had a noticeable dip in sales, likely because the change in the number permitted into the store shifted customer shopping schedules but didn't deter them from shopping completely. Canopies are situated outside to protect customers from the rain when there are occasional line-ups. The store also started delivering groceries and doing grocery pick-ups during COVID-19 for customers who preferred to shop from home. This helped reduce in-store volume and decreased wait times at the door, which were already short.

Sustainability Challenges

Beyond the physical store limits and challenges related to customer volume and increased sanitization the store also dealt with challenges to their sustainability practices during COVID-19. Like many grocers, Famous Foods also disallowed reusable bags initially and relied on plastic single use bags. This was a departure from their goal to limit plastics for customers. By summer 2020, the store did allow customers to bring reusable bags again by having them fill them in their buggies instead of placing them on the till. This was a better compromise to decrease single-use plastic bags and respond to customer preferences while reducing potential surface contact with the virus given buggies were still cleaned after individual use. In line with Vancouver's single use reduction bylaw, the store is planning to "get on target for early next year to get back to be able to be eliminating the plastic bag for sure." They are managing bag inventory to align with the updated January 2022 bylaw start. Another plastic packaging challenge pertains to suppliers using excessive plastic, for example by using plastic to cover individual cardboard boxes (e.g. carbonated drinks) as well as shrink wrapping cardboard pallets for shipping. Some suppliers use more plastic than others which is frustrating for purchasers who have limited control over supplier packaging choices. There have also been supply shortages in fibre-based meat trays used in the meat department which required a shift to recyclable plastic trays. This highlights a challenge of the store for being able to control the supply of eco-friendly packaging coming into the store and the limits on certified compostable and other options available at a consistent supply.

Silver Linings to COVID-19

There were also some silver-linings to the challenges the store faces during COVID-19 such as increased customer engagement. Cam observed, "I would say it's certainly far better for a business to be engaged with their customer" and the store has been fortunate to have a loyal customer base willing to maintain dialogue and provide feedback to staff. There has been value to updating cleaning protocols and having increased awareness for how to prevent pathogen spread and keep staff and customers safe. These higher profile cleaning practices highlight the benefits of enhanced cleaning and have increased customer satisfaction. On a related note, it has also increased awareness about how pathogens can spread at large events such as trade shows. The most recent trade show where grocers learn about products, network with suppliers, and test new items in stores moved online given the pandemic. While the in-person interaction was missed, it was an efficient way to get updates and had the additional benefit of reducing virus transmission.

Advice for Other Businesses

All small and medium sized businesses are different so employer needs will vary and solutions to challenges will need to be customized. Famous Foods advocates for an inclusive team environment where management can learn from staff and brainstorm together to create protocols that fit within guidelines and can be implemented within the store's current capacity. One way the store has better managed COVID-19-related changes is by fine tuning protocols by department based on staff input. Staying ahead on change implementation in anticipation of government guidelines change can also help to adapt to evolving changes and new systems. Overall, it's important to engage with staff and customers so you can better anticipate their needs and forge a thoughtful and ethical path. "I think you have to do what's right," reflected Cam. Listening to feedback and providing a cooperative space for people to engage will raise the quality of customer experience and help your business to grow, even during a pandemic.

