

# Addressing Food Insecurity: Engaging Food Retailers

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## Why Work with Food Retailers

Food is one of a family's most important expenditures that fuels the lives of the household. As the primary way most consumers procure food, food retailers play an important role in meeting a family's food resource needs, improving consumers' food access and helping to mitigate the likelihood of food insecurity. The accessibility and affordability of food retailers are critically important for limited-resource families with 250,000+ food retailers accepting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and 47,000+ retailers authorized to accept Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) (Food and Nutrition Service, n.d.).



Partnering with food retailers can make a big impact on the food selections for families. Work with food retailers can increase consumers' motivation and ability to make affordable, healthy food choices (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Furthermore, healthy food retail interventions have been shown to be effective in modifying the consumer food environment while improving dietary quality (Riggsbee, in press). A description of various food retail interventions can be found in the SNAP-Education Toolkit.

## Types of Food Retailers

When you hear the term food retail, you might think of a conventional supermarket (i.e., large grocery store) with aisles and aisles of food products. While a large grocery chain is a form of food retail, it is not the only form. Supermarkets only account for 65 percent of food retail sales (Levy et al., 2019).

At the end of this publication, you will find a list of various food retail types along with a brief description of each. Take time to familiarize yourself with this list. Each of these food retailers offers an opportunity to engage The Importance of Food Retail Partnerships.

### A Word About Behavioral Economics

In simplest terms, behavioral economics attempts to explain the reasons and mechanisms behind consumer behavior.

Based on the principles of behavioral economics, it has been demonstrated that small changes in the food retail environment can make a big impact on consumer behavior.

Some of these small changes might include:

- Locating healthy food options at eye level or at other prominent locations in a store.
- Using messaging, such as point-of-purchase prompts, to guide shopper behavior.
- Bundling (or arranging) healthy food choices to encourage selection.

## The Importance of Food Retail Partnerships

Access to a variety of food retailers from larger grocery stores to farmers markets to specialty grocers has been linked to healthier diets (see Middel 2019 for a review). In underserved areas, food retail interventions have demonstrated that customers will purchase fruits and vegetables and other healthy items when offered (Albert et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2012) and that even small retailers can profit from selling produce (Dunaway et al., 2016).

The issue for food retailers and customers often comes down to concerns about money—retailers worry they will stock healthy foods that customers won't buy and customers won't buy healthy foods if they are unsure how to prepare them.

From its onset, Extension has focused on improving people's diets through agricultural systems and nutrition education. Since the 1960s, Extension has addressed food insecurity through EFNEP and SNAP-Ed. For many decades, these programs focused on helping individuals learn how to eat healthy on a budget. More recently, there has been a shift in these programs to reinforce nutrition education with environmental and community changes that address food

## Getting Started with Local Food Retailers

**Site Selection.** The first step to partnering with food retailers is narrowing down potential sites. To make the most of your partnership with food retailers consider:

*What stores are more likely to serve customers with limited food resources?*

- Consider working with stores in low-income areas that accept SNAP/EBT and WIC.

*Are there stores near where I deliver UT Extension programming?*

- Partnering with these stores will allow you to connect participants with food retail interventions.

*What stores would be a good fit?*

- Some factors to consider include a store's willingness to work with you, how the store is viewed by the community and the clientele the store serves (i.e. does the store serve food to families or are customers predominately stopping by for other products?). You may also find the most success working with locally-owned stores (i.e., neighborhood stores) as they will not need to consult with a corporate office for decision making.

**Approaching Food Retailers.** Food retail managers are very busy and may not be able to hold regular meetings. You may be speaking with them as they are stocking a shelf or helping with the checkout. Consider the following tips when approaching store- owners or managers:

- Introduce yourself and share your connection with UT Extension and any other community groups.
- Compliment the store and any healthy food items they already offer.
- Ask about barriers they have encountered when selling healthy food products.
- Explain what you can offer them, framing the conversation around any incentives to participation, training or customer promotions you can provide.

**Assessment.** It is important to understand customer needs, store needs and the store environment. Assess the following before getting started:

- *Participant Perspectives:* Work with your participants and other potential store customers to get an understanding of their shopping needs.
- *Store Environment:* Walk through the store to get a feel for the customers, marketing strategies, cleanliness and foods offered. The SNAP-Ed: TNCEP program Shop Smart Tennessee provides a brief store assessment that can help guide potential interventions.
- *Food Retail Perspectives:* As you meet with food retail managers, get an idea the barriers they face when stocking and selling healthy food items in their store.

**Interventions.** UT SNAP-Ed: TNCEP offers a comprehensive food retail program, Shop Smart Tennessee, that includes incentive items, nutrition education and stocking guidance. Other potential food retail interventions include:

- Work with food retail managers to connect stores with local produce (example - work with a farmers market to offer excess produce to the store at a discounted price).
- Offer staff training on food safety, healthy food marketing strategies (see behavioral economics) or nutrition education.
- Assist food retail stores with social media marketing for healthy food promotion.
- Hold grocery store tours or food demonstrations and taste tests of healthy foods.

### **Building and Sustaining Relationships**

Building long lasting relationships with food retail stores can take time. A few tips to building and sustaining effective relationships include:

- Frequent your store regularly to check-in. Be a regular shopper and get to know staff.
- Work on effective communication with your store manager and ask them the method that works best for them (often this is face-to-face).
- Engage your store in conversations about barriers to selling and promoting healthy foods, training needs or customer incentives that work. Build promotions around their needs and the needs of their customers.
- Promote all store program efforts to the community through press releases, social media, at local meetings and through UT Extension classes. Make sure your partnering store knows you are promoting the program.
- Ask food retailers to become involved with your TNCEP coalition.

#### **Making a Difference in Lawrence County with Shop Smart Tennessee**

Working with food retailers can be a great way for new agents to get to know their county and for established agents to make new partners. When Stacy Clark became the FCS agent for UT Extension Lawrence County she started visiting convenience and conventional supermarkets as part of her effort to implement Shop Smart Tennessee. Right away she realized she had to be patient and persistent — once she decided on a store that would work well for the program, it took her three times to get in touch with the right store manager who could partner with her. Stacy had to convince the store manager they already had a lot of ingredients for the recipes and that this program would not mean extra work for the store. She and the manager worked together to decide what types of signage and recipes would work at the store.

Once the program started the manager worked hard to make it a success. He situated the table at a high traffic area close to the cashiers in case customers had questions. He started ordering extra fruit for the different recipes and the store always sold out of the recipe ingredients.

Lessons learned:

1. Partner with the person who buys and stocks the food.
2. Plan to put out new recipes around food shipments.
3. Make sure to visit the store first and inventory what the store has so you can reassure managers that they have a lot of the recipe ingredients.

## What is a food retailer?

A food retailer is a retailer (either a brick-and-mortar store or online) that sells food as a part, or as the whole, of their selling assortment. Below are some types of food retailers you may find in your communities. Definitions are provided by Levy et al., (2019).

### Learn the Retail Lingo

**Convenience Stores:** A small-scale retailer that offers a limited assortment of merchandise at a convenient store location with speedy checkout (e.g., 7-Eleven). Prices are generally higher for food products, compared to other types of retailers.

**Conventional Supermarket:** A large, self-service food retail store that offers a wide assortment of food products, including perishables (e.g., produce, meat, baked goods, dairy products) and non-perishables (e.g., canned goods, dried beans, pre-packaged grains). Non-food (e.g., health and beauty aids) and general merchandise (e.g., paper products) are also sold.

**Extreme-Value Retailers:** A small discount retailer that offers a limited selection of grocery and non-grocery items (e.g., household goods) at reduced costs for consumers, often selling items each for a dollar (e.g., Dollar Tree).

**Farmers Markets:** A retail marketplace that includes an assembly of farmers and makers who present merchandise through booths/tables/stands and sell products directly to customers.

**Grocery Outlets:** A retailer that offers irregular (i.e., unpredictable) grocery merchandise at a highly discounted rate. These retailers take advantage of opportunistic buys, receiving merchandise at a lower cost, which is passed on to the customer.

**Limited-Assortment Supermarket:** A retailer that stocks a limited selection of their assortment (e.g., ALDI) in order to reduce costs and increase efficiency to offer lower priced merchandise to consumers.

**Mom and Pop Stores/Neighborhood Retailer:** A small, independently or family-owned business that serves the local neighborhood.

**Online Grocery Retailers:** A retailer that sells food products online to be delivered directly to consumers. This includes both online-only retailers (e.g., FreshDirect, Amazon) or brick-and-mortar stores that have an online presence (e.g., Kroger, Wal-Mart).

**Supercenters:** Large stores that combine both a supermarket and a full-line discount store (e.g., Super Wal-Mart).

**Warehouse Clubs:** Large stores that offer assortments of both food and general merchandise. These retailers offer an unpredictable selection of products, but at lower prices due to bulk offerings (e.g. Sam's, Costco).

### Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). *Healthier food retail: An action guide for public health practitioners*. [www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpao/state-local-programs/pdf/Healthier-Food-Retail-guide-full.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpao/state-local-programs/pdf/Healthier-Food-Retail-guide-full.pdf)

Regional Nutrition Education and Obesity Prevention Centers of Excellence. [www.psechange.org](http://www.psechange.org)

SNAP-Ed Toolkit: Obesity Prevention Interventions and Evaluation Framework. [snapedtoolkit.org](http://snapedtoolkit.org)

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