

How to Increase Produce in Your Local Corner Store

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Find the illustrated Instructable online at:

www.instructables.com/id/How-to-Increase-Produce-in-Your-Local-Corner-Store

You like your neighborhood. You want to see the local independent businesses that make your neighborhood unique stay and thrive. You want to be able to buy a good banana at 6 am and 6 pm any day of the week. You want to be sure that people of all incomes and ages can live and eat well in your neighborhood. Then you probably want a healthy corner store culture in your neighborhood. But how? (Especially if you're busy or perhaps lazy -- we're in that not so secret society.)

Neighbors Project has drawn on the experience of the Food & Liquor project in the Uptown neighborhood of Chicago, and similar efforts around the country, to provide you with a range of options for tuning your corner stores into a thriving community asset for everyone in your neighborhood as a series of two Instructables. This one is ...

How to Increase Produce in Your Store

In a few rare cases, you might be able to just ask your store owner to carry produce once and it'll appear the next week. But usually you'll need to do some research and work closely with the store owner to ensure that they'll be successful. Keep in mind that your average corner store has a very small profit margin, so they're conservative about business changes. Yes, this is ultimately a business decision; not an ideological crusade.

To do this Instructable, you will need:

- At least one corner stores (aka liquor store, bodega, convenience store, fruit market or meat market)
- Money to buy groceries
- Access to a computer

Note

The people behind the Food & Liquor project are just some of the many people and organizations around the country who have worked on increasing food access in their neighborhoods. Check out the list of groups and resources at the bottom of this page for even more resources and advice.

step 1 Do Background Research

We definitely don't recommend simply barging into your local store, pounding your fist on the counter and bellowing "BANANAS!!!" Beyond the fact that you run the risk of being banned from the store and perhaps arrested, you're not likely to actually get any bananas. That said, you don't need a PhD in food access to make things happen. We suggest that you look into these three areas before you begin talking to your store owner. (Though you should get used to small talking before you ever bring up the topic; it'll help, and probably make your shopping more fun.)

-- Research other food-focused groups in the area. Meet with them to familiarize yourself with the local food landscape and make sure that you are not duplicating their efforts or otherwise stepping on their toes. If they're already working on the issue, ask them how you can help.

-- Determine the food landscape of your neighborhood by finding out where stores get their food. Is everyone in the area using the same distributor, are they buying it from a grocery store and marking up, or from a wholesale produce market? How many stores are in your area? Which are providing produce, and which aren't? Are multiple stores owned by the same people? You'll want

to be well-informed before addressing store owners on their turf. (We can't give you the answers because they vary by location.)

--Look into business incentives. For example, business improvement loans or grants through your alderman, city council, or local representative's office. Don't be afraid to contact your representative directly to find out what resources are available and may be going unused. As you're doing this, look for official institutional partners for the project. Ask them to sign on.

step 2 Walkabout and Talk to Store Owners

Now that you know some basic stuff about food access in your neighborhood, it's time to start talking to store owners. We call this "walkabouting."

If you're focusing on just one store, then your walkabout is just walking to your corner store. But if you're doing this as a neighborhood-wide initiative, make your walkabout into a traveling grocery shopping trip. You'll want to buy something in every store to help strike up a conversation and introduce yourself as a customer, so it might help to have some things you need around your kitchen in mind before you head out. In addition, here are some questions that you might want to ask when meeting with store owners and/or managers:

-- Basic introductory questions:

- Where are you from?
- What made you want to open this store?
- Do you own other stores?
- How long have you been in business?
- How is business going?

-- Who usually comes here?

-- What do you sell the most of? The least of?

-- What are the challenges you face?

-- Is there anything you think your customers want that you're not giving them?

-- Have you ever tried to stock fresh produce? (or more fresh produce?)

-- What are issues you've run into (or think you'd run into) with stocking fresh food?

-- Would you be interested in (XYZ solution) x = stocking produce, y = stocking more produce, z = advertising it on the web and in google mashups?

Your walkabouts will likely help you figure out which store owners, if any, are interested in carrying fresh produce. Concentrate on these folks going forward. They'll establish a precedent and market incentive for the other stores. Throughout this process, be sure to keep any institutional partners in the loop.

step 3 Work With Sympathetic Store Owners on Troubleshooting Potential Problems

Even if they're interested in carrying produce, store owners will likely be concerned about the following problems. You should be prepared to connect them to solutions. (Again, we can't give you the answers here because they vary by location.) Talk to local food access groups, chambers of commerce or, of course, the Internet, for suggestions.

Common Vendor Problems

- * Perishability
- * Low turnover
- * Poor/nonexistent marketing
- * Storage
- * Disposal
- * Temperature control
- * Lack of expressed demand
- * Lack of trust in liquor store as produce seller

At a certain point, you may feel like you shouldn't be doing all this work for the stores. This is when it will be helpful to have an institutional partner (elected official, non-profit, chamber of commerce, etc) to take over the follow up.

step 4 Follow Up

At this point, store owners will either go for it or prolong having to do something indefinitely. You will need to either just keep shopping by and encouraging them to go for it, ask an institutional partner to take over the project or give up on reaching this particular goal. If it's looking bleak, try a cooking class instead. If it works ...

step 5 Celebrate and Shop!

Congratulations! Your store owner has started carrying produce. Now you need to help ensure that they keep selling it by helping make it a success. This means shopping at the store and buying the produce, and it means encouraging your friends and neighbors to give corner store produce a chance. Try an e-mail, a Bodega Tasting Party, a note in your neighborhood blog/newsletter/e-mail list/party/whatever strikes your fancy.