



PUBLIC PLACES SHOULD OFFER BETTER OPTIONS.

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Healthier Food Options for Public Places

Tips for Working with Vendors

Background

There is strong public support for healthier food options in public buildings and on public properties: according to our research more than 8 in 10 people believe that vendors should offer healthier options. Most people also believe that states and localities should ensure that healthier options are available for visitors. At the same time, people believe that even if healthier options are available, people may not actually buy them, and there is concern for the vendors being required to stock certain types of food.

Vendors recognize that changes are coming to the industry, but worry about how this will affect their bottom line. While many vendors do believe it is important to provide healthy options on public property, they also want to stock products that will sell. Some concerns that have been heard from vendors in states across the country include:

- ▶ The perishable nature of some healthy foods will require them to purchase in smaller quantities and possibly at a higher price; restock foods more often because foods won't stay fresh as long; and increase expenses due to products that don't sell before the expiration date.
- ▶ Concern that the items just won't sell.
- ▶ Lack of availability of products on the market that meet healthy vending guidelines.
- ▶ Potential higher cost of healthy items may discourage customers from making purchases.

Dialogue

As you work on your campaign, it is helpful to open a dialogue with vendors. Vendors have expressed that they would like to be brought into conversation early so that they can express their concerns and not feel like that demands are being made of them that they did not have a say in. It is especially important to bring Randolph-Sheppard Vendors into the dialog early (see more about Randolph-Sheppard Vendors below). If you can learn where the vendors purchase their products, it can be helpful to engage suppliers in the conversation as well. Knowing what products could be available through the supplier could make the process easier.

Bring all interested parties to the table and discuss the opportunities and concerns surrounding changes to the vending and/or food service policies. This conversation can help you to understand the complexities of the vending business, and may offer the opportunity for you to share information and best practices from other states and municipalities where these policies have been successfully implemented. The way vendors manage their businesses may vary

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greatly from person to person. For example, some vendors may have large businesses and use computers for most of their business practices and other others may be very small businesses and use paper methods for business practices. Ask questions that will help you learn more about the business model they use.

As you speak with vendors, you may hear them refer to “Fit Pick.” The National Automatic Merchandising Association (NAMA), the association for vending machines operators, has created the Fit Pick vending and micro market labeling program, which designates foods that meet certain nutritional standards. There are two defined programs, Fit Pick which designates “better for you” products and Fit Pick SELECT which is based on the USDA Smart Snacks in School standards. The Fit Pick program is not as strong as most of the guidelines used by public health organizations and can place the “better for you” branding on products that might not be very different from typical vending machines offerings. It is also important to note that though the Fit Pick SELECT program is based on the USDA Smart Snacks in School standards, it has been modified slightly. Therefore, not all products that meet the Fit Pick SELECT program will meet Smart Snacks.

Acknowledge the progress that has been made, that vendors are offering more healthier-for-you options than they have in the past, but educate vendors on the importance of making additional improvements. Acknowledge their concerns, but be prepared with responses to some of the commonly stated issues that vendors raise. Overall it is important to go into the meeting treating vendors like partners in the process, not adversaries.

Be Prepared

When healthy vending and food service initiatives first started, there might not have been many healthier products on the market and some of the ones that were on the market did not have a long shelf life. Today, with the help of increased demand for healthier products and the passage of the Healthier Hunger-Free Kids Act, which ensures vending machines in schools will be stocked with healthier items and school meals are healthier, there are many healthier products on the market today that did not exist in the past.

When you are going into a meeting with vendors or other stakeholders, bring products lists of healthier items to help demonstrate the variety of options you can put in a healthy vending machine. You can also point out all the shelf-stable items, some fresh items might not have a long shelf life, but baked chips, whole grain crackers, seltzer water, granola bars, etc. are going to last as long as the less healthy alternatives. There are many product lists available, [this one might be a good starting place](#).

Vendors are also likely to bring up concerns about negative financial implications of offering healthier options, bring copies of [this fact sheet to help provide examples](#) of places that have implemented healthy vending or food service and have not seen a negative impact on their bottom line.

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If possible, do a short survey with employees and visitors to public property prior to your meetings with vendors. Ask employees and visitors if they would like to see more healthier-for-you items in their workplace (if employees) or on other public properties. In general, people do want to see more healthier-for-you options. If you can bring positive survey results with you to a vendor meeting, that can help to demonstrate the consumer demand for healthier options on public property.

To conduct the survey, you could start by reaching out to the health department, parks and recreation department, employee wellness staff, human resources, or another department with access to employees or visitors that could be supportive of your initiative. The department might be willing to administer a survey or to email your survey out to employees. Alternatively, you might be able to enlist graduate students to survey park-goers or other visitors to public property. It is best to let the parks and recreation department or other agency know that you are conducting a survey.

Key Messages

In addition to being prepared with product lists, case studies, and possibly survey results, it is important to use messages that are more likely to resonate with vendors. One example is that vendors could be missing out on business by not offering healthier options. Find more [key messages here](#).

Taste Tests

Work with vendors to offer tasting opportunities in the facilities they serve. By offering customers the chance to taste new products, the vendors get feedback on what products people like and which ones they don't. With this information, they have a better idea of which items they can stock that will be likely to sell. Here is a [guide for conducting taste tests](#) that make be helpful.

Randolph-Sheppard Vendors

As you begin this work, it is important to have an understanding of the [Randolph-Sheppard Act](#) (RSA). This is a federal law that gives legally blind vendors priority over other vendors to operate concession services or "vending facilities" (e.g., vending machines, cafeterias, and snack bars) on most federal property. First enacted nearly 100 years ago, the overall objective of the RSA is to promote employment opportunities for legally blind individuals. Nearly every state has adopted a similar law, often referred to as [mini-Randolph-Sheppard Acts](#). North and South Dakota are the only states without mini-RSAs.

For additional resources to help improve the nutritional quality of foods and beverages on public property, visit the [Voices for Healthy Kids toolkit](#).