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Charlottesville-based online grocer aims to expand in the D.C. area

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Posted: Monday, March 17, 2014 6:00 am

Relay Foods founder and CEO Zach Buckner said the company is prepared to go the distance in the race to become the go-to place for online groceries.

Founded by Buckner in 2008, the Charlottesville-based company has several expansion initiatives underway.

Relay also has done so well in Washington and Northern Virginia that it's outgrown a regional fulfillment center there, prompting the company to move to a new space as early as this summer, Buckner said. The company entered the D.C.-area market in mid-2012. Relay also recently added sustainably produced seafood to its product



relay



Posted on Mar 17, 2014
by [Nate Delesline III](#)

lineup.

And for the first time in the company's history, Relay will have

dedicated office space. An existing building on Carlton Avenue, which also houses a 12,000-square-foot fulfillment center, also will be home to Relay's corporate offices.

Like a long-distance run, Buckner said he's confident that measured, steady growth is the right approach for his online grocery enterprise.

"It's not a go big or go home business," Buckner said. "It's a business where you have to start really small. You have to crawl before you walk, and you have to walk before you run."

Here's how Relay works: When customers place their grocery orders online, they're transmitted to a fulfillment center, where the orders are individually packed and crated. The completed, crated orders are delivered via truck to locations around the community.

Relay offers everything you'd find in a traditional store, from name-brand staples, to locally sourced organic fresh produce and meat. Home delivery is available, too, but Buckner said the idea behind the community pickup locations is that Relay meets customers where they already are as part of their daily routine.

In addition to Charlottesville and Washington, Relay serves about a dozen communities from Baltimore south to Richmond, east to Williamsburg and west to Staunton. Buckner declined to say how many customers Relay serves, but did say that the company is adding, on average, 800 customers per week.

In 2012, Relay acquired Albemarle County-based Arganica Farm Club, a company with a similar business model. Today, Relay has about 150 employees. About 25 people will occupy the new Charlottesville offices. They'll handle the company's finance, engineering and customer service.

Colin Steers, who has been with Relay since 2011 and oversees operations in the company's Charlottesville area, said he is confident in the growth potential for online grocery sales.

"I don't think that big stores will necessarily go away," Steers said, adding that the Relay model eliminates many of the inefficiencies that big-box stores create.

Buckner agrees, saying Relay operates in a way "that no other grocer can do" by taking inventory by the pallet and picking directly from it.

"A big-box store can cost as much as \$15 million to build and a high-end supermarket requires about 150 people to move Lucky Charms to the front of the shelves," he said. At the same time, Buckner acknowledged stiff competition exists on both sides of the equation from traditional stores and from online titan Amazon, which recently began offering fresh grocery delivery in the Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle areas.



"With Amazon getting into grocery and starting to build their fresh network, I think that's going to change things," said Terri Maloney, a spokeswoman for Food World, a Maryland-based publication that follows the grocery industry in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Maloney said grocery stores still have a unique place in the traditional retail market in that customers appreciate the convenience of being able to walk into a store and get what they want exactly when they want it.

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"I think in the economy that we're in, there's still going to be an awful lot of shopping in big-box retail stores," Maloney said. At the same time, "All the supermarkets know that they have to pay attention to that e-commerce business," Maloney added.

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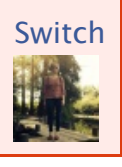
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