



Home > Features > Savvy Shopper Blog

Relay Foods introduces online grocery shopping service to Williamsburg

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By Nicole Paitzel
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Relay Foods, an online grocery store, launched its services in Williamsburg last month, says founder Zach Buckner.

Varying slightly from an online produce company like Backyard Produce or a meat truck service like Zaycon Foods, Relay Foods offers a variety of grocery items through its online service, including bakery, dairy, produce, meat and pantry goods.

Williamsburg shoppers can choose from more than 20,000 items through Relay Foods, shopping by category or distributor. Shoppers then pick up their groceries from a designated pick-up location.

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"You just drive up, pop your trunk, and we'll load the groceries for you," he says.

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In time, Buckner says, Williamsburg shoppers will have the option to have the groceries delivered to their home.

Relay Foods began as a small operation in Charlottesville in 2009, eventually expanding to Richmond and now Williamsburg.

Buckner says Relay Foods is different because he is able to get a discounted rate from his distributors, which include giants like Whole Foods and small producers from local farms, so that the cost of convenience isn't passed on to the customer.

"If you want to buy a can of organic black beans it will cost 89 cents with us, and you'll find it for 89 cents from Whole Foods," he says. "If you drove to all of the different stores and picked up your items, you wouldn't see a price difference."

Buckner says he is able to do this because his grocery vendors pay him to offer the products online and provide the delivery services. It's a business model is still in the experimentation stage, and Buckner thinks it is different enough to work.

"There is a lot of fear with this type of business (for entrepreneurs)," he says. "A lot of people have concluded that it can't work. But I've come up with a much lower cost way to do things -- having the vendors own the product until the time of delivery is one of the differences."

Large vendors like Whole Foods are interested, Buckner says, because contracting his online and delivery service is cheaper than building new stores.

"The average grocery store has shoppers coming from a 1.8 mile radius," he says. "This way, a grocery retailer can cover a whole area without building hundreds of new stores."

One price war Buckner knows he wins is in the baby goods category.

"You can't beat our prices on diapers," he says. "It is a little bit of a hook, but we're up front about it. If we can get families to try our services, we know they'll stick with us."

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About The Author

Nicole Paitzel has covered consumer news for the Daily Press since 2008. Since then, she's discovered a whole new love for the word "free," and regularly pleads with friends and family to avoid paying full price. If you see her in the store, check out her shopping cart - chances are, she's found a great deal! E-mail her at npaitzel@dailypress.com.



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