

“What Grocery Retail Stores Could Be Doing Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic”

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The World Health Organization (WHO) on January 30th, 2020, declared the spread of the novel coronavirus (or “Covid-19”) to be a global pandemic. States and subnational governments worldwide have been instituting drastic public health measures to contain the coronavirus, even as hospitals and medical workers strain to accommodate the ill and dying, non-essential workers are told to stay home, and the elderly or those with certain conditions are asked to remain inside and isolated from family or friends who might carry the virus and endanger those most vulnerable. Currently, according to the WHO’s Director-General, “More than 1 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 have now been reported to WHO, including more than 50,000 deaths,” and that number is steadily rising.¹

At the same time the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), another specialized agency of the United Nations system, has addressed the need for food security and safety of workers to maintain a stable food supply chain. In a joint statement made by the Director-Generals of the WHO, FAO, and WTO it was stated that, “it is also critical that food producers and food workers at processing and retail level are protected to minimize the spread of the disease within this sector and maintain food supply chains. Consumers, in particular the most vulnerable, must continue to be able to access food within their communities under strict safety requirements.”² Thus, the safety of food retail workers is essential for stability in the food supply chain and to maintain food security during this pandemic.

Amidst this current Covid-19 outbreak, regional and national chain grocery retail stores in many cities, especially in the United States at this time, have implemented a series of measures that involve sanitation and social distancing to limit the risk of exposure amongst its customers and employees.³ Though these new methods reduce the risk of exposure, they do not completely prevent it, and there have been instances where stores have still had outbreaks of the virus after implementing such measures. In the United States of America, *Trader Joe’s* and *Shoprite* are examples of two grocery stores that both had to temporarily close a few of their locations in New York, New Jersey, and Maryland due to confirmed and suspected cases of Covid-19 outbreaks.⁴ One *Instacart* employee who has organized a strike has

¹ World Health Organization’s Director-General Qu Dongyu, *WHO Director-General’s opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 3 April 2020*, April 3, 2020, available at <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19--3-april-2020>. Last accessed on April 5, 2020.

² Qu Dongyu, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Roberto Azevedo, Director-Generals of WHO, FAO, and WTO, respectively, *Mitigating impacts of COVID-19 on food and trade markets*, March 31, 2020, available at <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/1268719/icode/>. Last accessed on April 5, 2020.

³ Catherine Thorbecke and Zunaira Zaki, *Grocery store urges calm amid coronavirus crisis: ‘This is a demand issue. Not a supply issue,’* March 20, 2020, available at <https://abcnews.go.com/Business/grocery-stores-urge-calm-amid-coronavirus-crisis-demand/story?id=69706006>. Last accessed on April 5, 2020.

⁴ Alexis Morillo, *Trader Joe’s Is Closing Some Of Its Stores Temporarily To Fully Clean And Restock The Shelves*, March 27, 2020, available at <https://www.msn.com/en-us/foodanddrink/foodnews/trader-joes-is-closing-some-of-its-stores-temporarily-to-fully-clean-and-restock-the-shelves/ar-BB11NYFY#image=1>. Last accessed on April 4, 2020.

complained in an interview with *Slate* that some people are not keeping their distances in stores, stating that “At other stores, customers are treating this like it’s spring break. Whole families are shopping with kids running around rubbing their noses and then playing with the produce. That puts us at risk.”⁵ And recently, *Costco Wholesale* had to reduce its store hours to allow for more time to enhance sanitary conditions in their warehouse and alleviate the stress of employees who have complained of “exhaustion due to the constant demand of shoppers.”⁶ In order to effectively maximize social distancing; minimize the risk of exposure to the virus; reduce levels of stress on employees; accommodate the elderly and disabled populations; and yet continue to generate profit and equity, grocery retail stores need to temporarily implement a new plan of action.

The plan of action that I propose is the model of pick-up/delivery service.⁷ The way the pick-up service model would be generally applied to grocery retail stores is that every store would format its website to allow for customers to shop online as if they were in the store. Customers would have the capability of creating their own personal shopping list based on the inventory of the specific store where they are shopping. Once customers select their items, they would place their order with a designated time for pick-up. Employees would then receive the orders and organize the grocery cart, then store the cart in a designated area until time for pick-up. When it’s time for pick-up, runners would be assigned to a cart ready for delivery to drop off the order to customers parked in front of the store. Customers would be given a few minutes to pack their cart, and in some cases, runners could pack the groceries in the trunk for them. When completed, cart organizers would gather the carts together for cleaners to sanitize the carts and prep them for packers to pack them for the next order. Police officers who have been assigned for crowd control would be tasked to organize and direct the traffic and guide the cars to their designated parking areas for pick-up. Customers who place orders would be given an hour after their scheduled time to pick-up their order before it would be cancelled, and money refunded.

In order to accommodate the elderly or disabled who may not be tech savvy or able to access computers, the model could be adjusted to that of the telehealth model that health care providers are currently using.⁸ The way this would work is that the time that is currently allotted at grocery retail stores for elderly hours will be used for elderly and disabled persons to call in and place orders. The call-in set up would provide several options: first, an elderly or disabled person could speak directly to a representative to place an order; second, their phone order could be recorded on a voice message and have someone receive the messages once recorded; or third, they could send a text message with orders as well as scheduled time for pick-up or delivery. They would be given an extra hour after the scheduled time for pick-up of their order before it would be cancelled, and money refunded. These options allow for elderly or disabled persons who cannot wait in long lines outside a grocery store to be accommodated by

⁵ Aaron Mark, “*They’re Counting on our Desperation*”: An Instacart worker on why she’s striking for Coronavirus Protection,” March 30, 2020, available at <https://slate.com/technology/2020/03/an-instacart-worker-on-why-she-s-striking.html>. Last accessed April 4, 2020.

⁶ Walter Loeb, “*Costco Cuts Hours and Makes Changes to Services In Response To Coronavirus Crisis*,” March 30, 2020, available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/walterloeb/2020/03/30/costco-cuts-hours-and-makes-changes-in-response-to-the-coronavirus-crisis/#62032af32fb7>. Last accessed April 2, 2020.

⁷ Instructions from one supermarket chain in the U.S. available at <https://www.hy-vee.com/grocery/customer-service/getting-started.aspx>. Last accessed April 5, 2020.

⁸ Michael Brady, “*CMS expands Medicare telehealth services to fight COVID-19*,” March 17, 2020, available at <https://www.modernhealthcare.com/medicare/cms-expands-medicare-telehealth-services-fight-covid-19>. Last accessed on April 2, 2020.

ordering groceries in the way most familiar and comfortable for them, and be given priority, but at the same time control and limit the volume of calls the store receives.⁹

Now, the way the delivery service model would work is essentially the same process as the pick-up service model. However, the difference is when it comes time to complete the online order, the customer would enter their delivery address, phone number, and available time and place for drop off. Grocery retail stores, depending on their capabilities, would then deliver the order to the customer's delivery address at the selected date and time for delivery. Delivery persons would drop the delivery off at the front door of the address, or suggested place of drop-off. This would still allow for minimal direct contact and convenience for customers who may not be able to do pick-up service.¹⁰

The temporary pick-up/delivery service provides various benefits while achieving the primary goal of grocery retail stores at this time of minimizing exposure to coronavirus for customers and employees while still generating profit by providing necessary food items for people to purchase. Employees' face to face contact with customers at grocery store check-out lines or shopping aisles during restocking of shelves would be reduced. Customers would be offered a convenience that would be especially helpful for those who are elderly or disabled who may not have the capability of waiting in long lines and would be at most risk from exposure to the virus, and the telehealth model will provide access and convenience for those who are not technologically proficient.¹¹

Addressing the need for continuing employment of grocery store employees as essential workers, the proposed model recognizes that their existing tasks would still continue. Some may be modified to include new tasks such as organizing and sanitizing carts; arranging and organizing orders for pick-up and delivery; stocking and organizing inventory in the warehouse and store; delivery of grocery orders; and, for some, to manage phone calls and incoming orders. The proposed model allows for grocery retail stores to maintain a stable supply of inventory. Online orders allow the stores to have better control of the number of items customers can purchase by setting a limit online for popular products, avoiding hoarding by a few. The model also involves participation of the community, as police officers are needed for crowd control and organizing traffic for pick-up, or third-party delivery services such as *Instacart* could be used for delivery and pick-up.

Most importantly the proposed model would protect customers, employees and their families by reducing points of contact and minimizing exposure to the coronavirus, while limiting the chances of business disruption. Some businesses have already started using this model, and others are in the process

⁹ Meryl Picard, "Occupational Therapy Student Calls on Therapists to Keep the Elderly Online and Out of Stores," March 19, 2020, available at https://www.shu.edu/health/news/occupational-therapy-student-keeps-elderly-online-and-out-of-stores.cfm?utm_source=iContact&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=health-intervention-and-communication-team&utm_content=Staying+Connected+as+a+Community%2C+March+27%2C+2020. Last accessed on April 2, 2020.

¹⁰ Nicolette Accardi, "A list of stores and apps where you can order food and grocery deliveries," March 18, 2020, available at <https://www.nj.com/coronavirus/2020/03/a-list-of-stores-and-apps-where-you-can-order-food-and-grocery-deliveries.html>. Last accessed on April 4, 2020.

¹¹ Meryl Picard, "Occupational Therapy Student Calls on Therapists to Keep the Elderly Online and Out of Stores," March 19, 2020, available at https://www.shu.edu/health/news/occupational-therapy-student-keeps-elderly-online-and-out-of-stores.cfm?utm_source=iContact&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=health-intervention-and-communication-team&utm_content=Staying+Connected+as+a+Community%2C+March+27%2C+2020. Last accessed on April 2, 2020.

of transitioning towards it.¹² However, the Covid-19 pandemic provides the perfect reason why this model should be temporarily implemented by all grocery retail stores operation at this time of crisis. The proposal discussed here in detail is an example of implementing public health recommendations such as: social distancing (now suggested to be 6 or even 10 feet apart, a distance almost impossible to maintain in a typical supermarket while customers shop for groceries); proper disinfecting of surfaces contaminated by the coronavirus; use of personal protective gear (masks or scarves and gloves) by everyone in public; opportunities for essential workers like grocery store employees to be able to wash and/or sanitize their hands before and after touching surfaces or handling boxes, bottles or produce; and stay at home orders. Special accommodations for the elderly or disabled who are the most vulnerable to the virus that are part of the proposed model offer options to remain inside their homes to avoid contamination by others and to make ordering necessary groceries easy through a choice of the telephone or a computer.

Until medical research continues and more is known about the novel coronavirus and prevention of its spread, and until a treatment and a vaccine are discovered, tested, and approved, practical steps such as these are necessary to protect human lives around the globe, reduce the risks to public health, and demonstrate social responsibility. The proposal encourages economic activity and even growth as store owners and operators continue profitable sales, while employees keep their jobs without putting their lives at risk by going to work.

Such a service model for retail grocery stores as described in this proposal would be most effective for large supermarkets serving cities and neighborhoods where density is a risk factor for spread of COVID-19. The proposal may be useful as well in some other settings, where the goal is to provide food supplies to consumers who are able to shop and purchase groceries. Other similar preventive public health measures would be applicable to food banks, soup kitchens, institutional residences, and small grocery outlets in developed and developing countries, following appropriate guidelines from the WHO and FAO. Indeed, the world is small, and we are all connected.¹³

¹² Russel Redman 1, "Coronavirus: How leading grocery chains are responding to keeping customers safe and shelves stocked," March 13, 2020, available at <https://www.supermarketnews.com/retail-financial/coronavirus-how-leading-grocery-chains-are-responding-keep-customers-safe-and>. Last accessed on April 2, 2020.

¹³ Maximo Torero Cullen, "COVID-19 and the risk to food supply chains: How to respond," March 29, 2020 available at <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8388en/CA8388EN.pdf>. Last accessed on April 5, 2020.