
How to Create a Neighborhood Food-Buying Club

Yes we can!

A food-buying club is a group of people who get together to buy food in bulk at wholesale prices.

*A **How-to Guide** for neighborhood leaders working to make life better for people in Battle Creek*



How to Create a Neighborhood Food-Buying Club

Shopping for food takes a big bite out of our wallets.

Supermarkets are expensive, and if we shop at smaller stores, the prices are even higher. How about a way to save money on basic groceries, learn some new skills, eat healthier, and strengthen our sense of community all at the same time? Starting a food-buying club is a way to do all of the above.



A food-buying club is a group of people who get together to buy food from the “wholesale” market (the same place that super-markets and stores buy their food) which is not open to individuals — just businesses and groups. Because they sell in bulk, wholesale distributors provide low prices. Food-buying clubs can save money because they avoid the additional cost that a supermarket adds on to make a profit. Food-buying clubs place orders with distributors and buy for their own use. They can be organized to buy common grocery items or special types of products such as produce, natural foods, or canned goods.

Food buying clubs are run on a volunteer basis, with most members volunteering time toward the tasks of ordering the food, keeping the books, and distributing the food when it comes in. Tasks can rotate so that everyone has a chance to try a new job (and no one person gets stuck with a job no one likes).

What Are the Advantages of Starting a Food-Buying Club?

- Neighbors save money on the food that their families need.
- Neighbors learn new skills related to the food industry, health, and home economics. Neighbors also may share recipes and learn about new products.
- By working together, members of the club get to know one another and strengthen their community.

Gather Information and Club Members

First, gather **information** about potential distributors (a list of some distributors is included at the end of this how-to guide). Find out not only products and prices, but also details — for example, the type of locations they can deliver to, any minimum order limits, and what is needed to apply to buy products from them.

Next, find some **members**. A group of seven to sixteen committed members works well. Discuss the idea with family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. Share copies of current price guides for distributors so that potential members can get a clear idea of what is available to them and at what prices. Describe the value to them in terms of savings and building community.

Building **commitment** within the group is key. It’s very important that responsibilities are shared so that everyone feels like part of the club and no one person is doing too much of the work. This can lead to burnout and the end of your club! Each member is responsible for making sure his or her task gets done — even if that means finding someone to cover for him or her if a problem arises.

As you’re looking for members, think about some of the jobs involved in the food-buying club and the types of personalities that you’ll want to include to get those jobs done. Consider the people you know and try to recruit those who can do the following:

- One organized person to do overall management of the food-buying club.
 - Two or three detail-minded people who are good with numbers to collect everyone’s orders, calculate the totals, process the order with the distributor, and put together orders.
 - Two or three people who will feel comfortable offering their homes for the day of the delivery.
 - Six or more people who are available at delivery times to sort food and make sure everyone gets what they ordered.
 - One or two people who are good with money and willing to serve as treasurers — gathering everyone’s money and paying the distributor, remembering to fairly divide any taxes and shipping costs.
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Hold a Start-up Meeting

Explaining how it works

Once you've found people who are interested, invite them to a meeting. When they are gathered, explain what the club is all about: members share the work fairly, trading their time for food at wholesale prices. Explain these six basic steps to make the process work:

- 1) Members take a look at the distributor list and decide what they want to order.
- 2) Members make up their individual orders, which are then compiled into a group order. Usually they pre-pay their bills so that the club has the money to pay at the time of delivery.
- 3) The compiler sends the group's order to the distributor.
- 4) Members meet a truck at a designated delivery site, with several people available to unload and check in the club's order.
- 5) Members divide up the order into individual household orders.
- 6) Individual bills are re-calculated after the delivery. Credit or debit adjustments are made as needed and members take their groceries home.

Action steps

- A distributor must be chosen.
- Members must decide how often orders will be placed.
- Members must decide how often regular club meetings will be held.
- An organizational committee must be set up. This committee will cover overall coordination, price guide distribution, ordering and organizing, deciding and confirming delivery location, delivery breakdown, bookkeeping, and new member orientation.

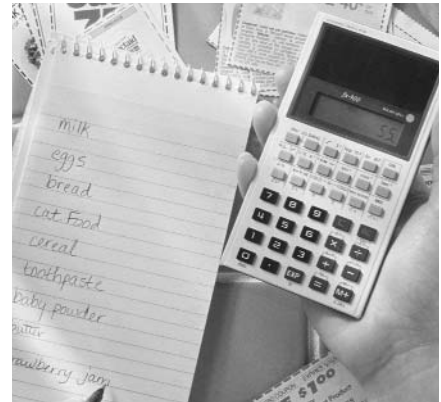
- Early job assignments must be given to members, understanding that these will rotate. To make these assignments clear, create an information sheet with every member's name, phone number, and the jobs he or she is willing to do. This should be distributed to everyone shortly after the first meeting.
- Schedule the next meeting, and agree on what should happen before that meeting takes place — assigning people to investigate and make decisions.

Assignments to complete before second meeting

Divide up assignments in a way that is fair — everyone should have an active role to play and have something to do before the next meeting.

- A delivery site must be chosen. The site needs to be accessible for delivery, have space for the order to be sorted out, and have flexible hours. A site that has a sink for washing up, a refrigerator, and a phone is also a plus. Possible delivery and distribution sites are churches and public buildings.
- A person must be assigned as “the compiler” for each order. This person collects everyone's list of needs.
- A deadline for orders that members give to the compiler must be set.
- A time when the compiler is to order from the wholesale supplier is set.
- The time that the order will be delivered and the delivery location are made clear.
- People have been assigned to be “sorters.”
- A treasurer has been assigned for each order.

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Tips for Making the Buying Club Successful

Make things simple, fair, and fun

- Computerize: less work is better. A good personal computer program designed for buying clubs will save a lot of time on organizing orders, making labels, and keeping the books. (Check out the National Resources section of this guide for a free, downloadable software program!)
- Focus always on making the co-op fast, easy, and convenient for your members. Keep meetings as short as possible, and do what is necessary to keep the entire process efficient and quick. This is the best way to attract and keep satisfied members.
- Divide the work so that it is shared fairly. Create jobs for interested members who have special scheduling or other needs.
- Share favorite recipes and food among members of the group.
- Have fun! Enjoy yourselves! The fun and joy of working together is a big part of a buying club. Also, set aside some time just to socialize. Have a potluck dinner or picnic every month before your business meeting.

Yes we can!

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Plan to Grow

- More members mean less work, less expensive food for the members, and greater stability for the club.
- Orient new members. Be clear with them from the start about what they can expect from the club and what the club expects from them. You may want to set up a trial ordering/trial membership period.
- Buying clubs are often not visible in their communities. Local people who would like to join may not even know you exist. Become more visible. Publicly support and recognize your leaders and activists. Network with as many other community organizations as possible. Have your club contribute to your community by donating a cookbook to the public library, regularly giving food to the local food bank, or co-sponsoring a health-related event. Your buying club can become a community resource on healthy food. Offer cooking or nutrition classes to senior centers, daycare centers, schools, etc.
- If the club gets too large, help people start a new one! The more you work together cooperatively to save money, the greater neighbors' sense of community pride will grow.

Help people try new things

- Offer your members the largest selection of products possible, including everything the warehouse sells. More choices make for happier members!
- Share recipes and food often within your group. Usually, members are willing to order an unfamiliar product if they learn what to do with it and/or get a chance to taste it first. Have the club itself order one case of a new or unfamiliar item with each order. Let members sample it while they work. Many clubs have found new favorites by doing this.
- Use an "extras table." If, after putting together the orders, members have ordered at least 3/4 of the wholesale amount of an item, order that item and sell the leftover amount at an extras table on the day the items are divided. An extras table ensures that people actually get more of the items they ordered and gives other members a chance to see products before purchasing them. Many groups swear by it and rarely have any inventory left over to sell at the next divide. Put somebody in charge of extras.

A food-buying club can make life better for your family, your neighbors, and your community.

Local Distributors List

Following is a list of distributors who deliver to Battle Creek. This is not, however, a complete list. Check resources listed at the end of this how-to guide to find additional distributors. Another idea is to check the local farmer's market at the Burnham Brook Center (966-2566). Call them for days and times.

Blooming Prairie Warehouse

2340 Heinz Road, Iowa City, IA 52240
800-323-2131, www.bpcop-op.com

Northeast Cooperatives, Inc.

P.O. Box 8188, 49 Bennett Drive
Brattleboro, VT 05304
800-334-9939, www.northeastcoop.com

Frontier Natural Products Co-op

PO Box 299, 3021 78th St.
Norway, IA 52318
800-669-3275, www.frontiercoop.com

North Farm Co-op Warehouse

204 Regas Road, Madison, WI 53714
800-236-5880, www.northfarm-coop.com

Natural Farms, Inc.

2077 S. Stoughton Rd.
Madison, WI 53716
866-333-9907 (toll free)
www.naturalfarms.org

National Resources

www.foodclub.org – offers free downloadable software to manage the administrative and organizational tasks of running a food-buying club.

National Cooperative Business Association – provides information about cooperatives and a limited list of distributors.

202-638-6222, www.ncba.org

Feel free to share this guide with friends and neighbors. Call 269-969-2228 for additional copies and for other guides on a variety of how-to topics.

Sources: *How to Start a Cooperative Food Buying Club*, ©2000 Blooming Prairie; Kim De Lallo, *Start a Food Buying Club*, ©2003 Life Media.

Yes we can! is a collaboration among Battle Creek residents and organizations working to help kids achieve in school and build a solid economic future for the people of our community. *Yes we can!* is funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

For general questions about *Yes we can!*, call 269-969-2228 or visit www.wkkf.org/yeswecan. To apply for a mini-grant to support your neighborhood or community project in Battle Creek, call the Battle Creek Community Foundation at 269-962-2181.

Yes we can!