

# Marketing Healthy Foods in a Rural Convenience Store Setting

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Can a small store in a rural  
Native American community offer  
culturally-appropriate, locally-  
sourced, healthy food and  
still make a profit?

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#### Cultural Preservation and Commerce: Self-Sufficiency through Local Sourcing

In many rural communities, the only place to purchase food is a convenience store stocked with soft drinks, reheated frozen fried foods, and snacks filled with fats and sugars. Neighborhoods and rural areas with convenience stores have higher rates of obesity, especially in low-income neighborhoods, which usually have little access to diversified food markets. Childhood obesity rates are higher in schools that are located close to convenience stores and fast food service. Yet, the convenience store and gas station complex is often the first business selected by rural citizens for their entry into community economic development.

Sipaulovi Village, located in the Hopi Nation in remote northern Arizona, also chose a gas station and convenience store as the first project for Sipaulovi Development Corporation (SDC), a non-profit organization of the Village.

Recognizing the destructive impact that a standard convenience store would have on community health, SDC undertook this research project to find out if a small store in a rural Native American community could offer culturally-appropriate, locally-sourced, healthy food selections and still make a profit.

Although healthy corner stores are more common in urban areas, to date, few Native communities are aware of proven alternatives for stocking and merchandising both healthy choices and fast food. With funding from the University of Arizona, SDC conducted research to develop a model of a "fast food" deli that was based on traditional Hopi ingredients and culture, and was economically viable. The community identified Hopi cultural preservation, support for local commerce, and self-sufficiency as its primary goals.

In addition to testing recipes, sourcing local ingredients, and establishing competitive pricing, the project developed concepts for promoting healthy food purchases through merchandising strategies and in-store education.





# Marketing Healthy Foods

## Healthy Food

In a series of community focus sessions, participants defined food as “nourishment” and healthy food as “natural, minimal environmental impact, not processed.” The rationale for determining which of the many traditional Hopi foods would be sampled in this project included:

- Seasonal availability of Hopi agricultural products;
- Existing foods that are familiar but not necessarily made too often; and
- Foods not currently on a menu in an existing Hopi restaurant

The following products were selected for testing and pricing:

- Sakwaviqaviki - Blue Corn Tortilla
- Piklav'kutuki – Roasted Piki
- Somiviki – Sweet blue corn bread
- Hurzusuki – Blue corn bread
- Hohoyi – Wild herbal tea
- Sakwats'tsilomiviki – Blue corn tamale
- Paatvusuki – Hominy and bean stew

The project partnered with the Hopi Elderly and Nutrition Center and staff to create the product recipes that resembled the authentic traditional version in taste, presentation, and portion. The elders at the Nutrition Center provided valuable input, from recipe development to tasting.

## Food Samplings

Foods that were in season were selected for sampling. Avenues for incorporating locally sourced ingredients into these traditional-based foods were researched. At food tastings held at community events, a total of 150 people filled out surveys, which yielded the following marketing information:

- 89% reported they would purchase the foods if available in a convenience store.
- 31% reported that taste is what they liked about the traditional foods.
- Hopi foods were considered healthy because they were made with natural or local ingredients (51%), not processed (25%), and not fried or containing fat (16%).

- 84% wanted to know nutritional information about the products.
- 23% would purchase the food one time per week; 22%, seven times; and 9%, three times.

Most people reported that the foods would be eaten in combination with something else, like beans or meats. Some foods like hohoyi and blue corn tortilla would be eaten every day.

The prices that respondents indicated they would pay for traditional Hopi food products in the store deli were commensurate with market prices for fast foods.

## Local Sourcing

With these traditional foods as the core menu for the deli, SDC developed a business plan to determine if healthy, locally-sourced food products could be both competitively priced and profit making. SDC's goal is to purchase food that is grown locally and sustainably.

It was projected that sourcing from local farmers would support Hopi's agricultural sector and increase availability of reasonably priced fresh and traditional foods. However, the project's cultural consultants pointed out that Hopi traditional farming practices are not compatible with mass production. Hopi food production and distribution are based on reciprocity within the context of interpersonal relationships and cultural values.

At this time, the project has not determined how, or if, to source locally-grown ingredients in sufficient quantity to meet the demands of a commercial business. Therefore, when a local, sustainable option is not available, or when an item cannot be grown locally, then the next choice is to purchase regionally from small-scale operations. Each sourcing decision will examine the producers' farming practices for sustainability, defined as: “A practice [which] can be continued indefinitely without degrading the systems and resources upon which it relies.” (Sustainable Food Project, [http://www.yale.edu/sustainablefood/food\\_purchasing.html](http://www.yale.edu/sustainablefood/food_purchasing.html))

## Food Expenditures

During 2004-2005, Hopi consumers spent an average of \$9.6 million annually on food. The majority was spent in stores located outside of the Hopi Nation. Items purchased within Hopi were primarily beverages and snacks, averaging \$15.34 per trip to the local stores (Natwani 2004, Hopi Community Food Assessment). With dynamic merchandising and marketing, SDC can recapture part of the estimated \$7 million annually that is currently being spent on food that is brought in from the border towns.

This project targeted the health and nutrition issues faced by the working poor, which primarily are limited access to healthy foods and limited food dollars to spend. SDC's model includes market-rate sourcing, pricing, and educational outreach strategies to establish a locally-owned, sustainable, and profitable project that will benefit the community.

## Education

Proposed in-store educational campaigns designed to change tastes and purchasing habits include:

- Create dynamic posters and shelf labels that illustrate nutritional value as a function of cost.
- Teach individuals to read labels and how to identify fats, sugars, chemicals, and artificial sweeteners.
- Hold a festival with films like *Supersize Me* and *The Future of Food*.
- Hold workshops on how to do a family food budget.
- Teach individuals to do a cost analysis of purchasing habits, including gas, wear on vehicles, and driving time.
- Include menu planning and how to shop for nutritional “bargains” (no processed foods).
- Conduct food sampling so people can taste how quality and freshness in a product is more satisfying and provides greater value for the amount spent.
- Highlight foods in season and pass out recipes to revive yearly anticipation for these traditional foods.



- Design a list of commonly purchased food products with comparative nutritional values per serving cost to help families' transition to healthier foods. For example, substitute diluted fruit juice for Kool-Aid, or cook a small roast to slice at home instead of buying prepackaged lunch meat.

### Conclusion

For the healthy convenience store model to be successful, the selection of foods and consumer education must mesh to result in cost competitive merchandise and healthier choices that support local agricultural producers and the economy. SDC's promotion of traditional local foods ensures that Hopi dietary needs, cultural food practices, and agricultural traditions are supported with the local food dollar.

Local stores are not just economic enterprises. In a remote rural community, they fill an important community need and can be designed as a tool for public education and shaping healthier food choices. Given the epidemic rates of diabetes and

obesity within Hopi and other rural Native communities, the standard convenience store must be transformed into a culturally-relevant community marketplace for sharing and exchange, a place where the people teach each other by reclaiming our traditional foods as everyday foods.

SDC's primary goal was to find out if meeting cultural, nutritional, and health goals benefiting the working poor could be financially sustainable. Based on the data analysis and project findings, the answer is, "Yes." ●

### About the Investigators

Sipaulovi Development Corporation, Inc. is a non-profit corporation of Sipaulovi Village, Hopi Nation, Second Mesa, Arizona. The investigators included Susan Secakuku, Isaura Andaluz, and Suzanne Jamison; with Raymond Namoki, Delwyn Takala, and Hopi elders.

### Author's Picks for Further Reading

Facing the Future: The Current State of Hopi Sustenance and Farming, 2004 Hopi Community Food Assessment Report, The Natwani Coalition, December 2007.

Public Health Nursing - Health Promotion/ Disease Prevention Childhood Obesity, Indian Health Service, Phoenix Service Unit, C. Onsa, M. Stacey, Dr. Anna Lewis, Hopi Health Care Center, 2007.