

Grocers

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'Unprecedented' demand

At a time when other sectors of the economy have stalled due to the spread of coronavirus, grocery stores are seeing big business as people stock up.

Michael Roth, owner of Roth's Fresh Markets, said since March 12, when Oregon closed schools, company sales jumped to three times their normal rate.

"The last few days we have still been very busy at twice normal sales."

Roths2GO, the grocer's online ordering and curbside pick-up platform, is at a 700% increase in usage from this time last year.

LifeSource Natural Foods marketing manager Felipe Gonzalez said the store had a total of 30 online and phone orders in the entire month of February. Now, "It's up to 100 or more a day."

"The good news," he said, "is that we were already pointing ourselves in that direction, but it's been sped up."

Safeway, part of the Albertsons chain, is currently hiring delivery drivers for all stores in Oregon. Salem-area WinCo stores are hiring temporary grocery clerks, and Fred Meyer has 200+ Oregon jobs posted, including those for e-commerce clerks and parcel clerks, aka curbside pick-up attendants.

Fred Meyer spokesperson Jeffery Temple said, "Even before the state of emergency pick-up service was on a strong incline."

Now, with demand at "unprecedented levels," he said, "we absolutely need more people to help get those orders fulfilled."

Grocery shopping online

LifeSource has converted its cafe into a staging area for curbside pick-ups. Chandra Timm, a newly hired "harvester," spends her shifts shopping.

Working from a clipboard, she selects items for two or three orders simultaneously. Still in her first week on the job, Timm knows where the commonly ordered items are, but every so often has to ask a more seasoned coworker where to find something.

An order calls for aloe vera, but the store is sold out. Since the customer stipulated they could make a substitute, Timm selects vegetable glycerin instead.

South Salem resident Alex Benenson and his partner, in their late 50s and 60s, respectively, had never tried online grocery shopping before the CDC began recommending people practice social distancing.

Because they fall in an at-risk category, Benenson said, "We're trying not to go out too much." The couple has now tried online ordering with either curbside pick-up or delivery from Fred Meyer, LifeSource, and Roth's. So far, he said, the experience has been a little uneven, but not bad.

Shopping for groceries online, "for somebody like me who uses Amazon, it wasn't a foreign experience." The biggest difference, he said: "The way their websites are set up, you can't just say, 'I want a dozen eggs.' You have to pick specific eggs."

If the store doesn't have a dozen of the eggs you ordered, the grocery picker has to make a call: the same product but a different quantity? Or the same quantity but a different product? Plus, with varying supply levels, your order may or may not be entirely complete.

He's also found the selection online to not be as expansive as in stores. Shopping at Roth's, he can find "several brands of coffee from local places, but online there might be slightly less choice."

The online wait

Regardless of which option shoppers



An employee bags groceries at LifeSource Natural Foods. MADELEINE COOK / STATESMAN JOURNAL

choose, they're likely to encounter a longer wait than typical.

LifeSource has a fixed number of orders they can fulfill every day, and recently the wait time has been pushing their self-imposed maximum of 48 hours. The Albertsons website warns of "fulfillment delays" for online orders. Fred Meyer's says, "Due to increased demand, you may experience longer wait times, delayed deliveries or limited inventory."

The first time he ordered from Fred Meyer, Benenson said, it was meant to be ready on Friday evening.

"I just kept getting these texts to say oh your order's going to be a little bit later." The last text came in at 10 or 11 p.m., though he did receive his order the following day.

At Roth's in McMinnville, as of Monday, March, 23, orders were booked solid through Sunday for deliveries.

"I would love to double the amount of orders we're fulfilling each day," McKinney said, "that's my whole goal." To support that, he plans to hire 10 people.

Considering the demand on these systems, said Benenson, "overall I think they're doing a really good job and they're obviously slammed right now."

Increasing in-store safety measures

Shoppers may be switching to online and pick-up orders to follow social distance guidelines, but stores are dealing with methods to keep shoppers and workers safe.

In "wide-open grocery stores," said Roth, "people can be pretty good at social distancing, except at check out where you have to be close enough to hand a cashier your money."

Inspired by Texas-based H-E-B Grocery, Roth's has installed Plexiglas barriers in front of all cashier check-out lanes at all stores. Fred Meyer is in the process of adding similar barriers throughout stores in the region.

Stores are also adding in-store signs and floor markers to remind shoppers to maintain recommended social distance.

Stores are supplying hand sanitizer and cart wipes at entrances, and using them liberally on credit card readers and check-out counters.

Salem's Trader Joe's store has turned off automatic doors and is allowing only 20 shoppers into the store at a time.

Several grocers are setting aside specific hours for those at higher risk to

shop, avoiding the general public.

Still, grocery aisles are only so wide, and frequent need for employees to stock shelves makes it difficult for employees and shoppers to adhere to the recommended 6 feet of social distancing.

Despite widespread sanitizing protocols, grocery stores can't be completely risk-free for either shoppers or employees. Willamette Week reported a Fred Meyer employee in Portland tested positive for COVID-19 this week, and service workers in any store bear some degree of risk.

In some states, grocery workers have been designated "emergency personnel," a distinction that entitles them to free or reimbursed child care. While Oregon has not taken such a step, Oregon's United Food & Commercial Workers Local 555 is advocating hazard pay and physical protections for grocery workers.

"The grocery line is the front line," said union spokesperson Miles Eshaia.

"Food is one of those things that keeps us from falling into the abyss."

The union, which represents workers at area locations of Safeway, Albertsons, Fred Meyer and Roth's, is also working to secure First Responder protections for grocery workers, a status that would prioritize their access to COVID-19 testing, financial assistance access to protective masks and gloves.

"Our team members are the best! They are dedicated to our customers and gladly worked tirelessly for long hours," said Roth, "I am humbled and forever grateful by their dedication during this crisis."

Madeline Cook of the Statesman Journal contributed reporting for this article.

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NOTICE OF BUDGET COMMITTEE MEETING

A public meeting of the Budget Committee of the of the Drakes Crossing RFPD, Marion, State of Oregon, to discuss the budget for the fiscal year July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021, will be held at 19364 Powers Creek Lp Rd. NE Silverton, OR 97381. The meeting will also be available by telephone conference at (978)990-5000 using Access Code 585549. The meeting will take place on April 16, 2020 at 7:00 PM.

The purpose of the meeting is to receive the budget message and to receive comment from the public on the budget. This is a public meeting where deliberation of the Budget Committee will take place. Any person may appear at the meeting and discuss the proposed programs with the Budget Committee.

A copy of the budget document may be inspected or obtained on or after April 10, 2020 at Drakes Crossing RFPD, between the hours of 3:00 pm and 7:00 pm. Budget Committee meeting information will be posted on the Drakes Crossing RFPD website: www.drakescrossingfire.com.

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