

Tips on Launching Online Ordering

Brooke Harvey, Nutrition Services Coordinator, The Open Link

Choice Pantry to SmartChoice Online Ordering:

- Learn from others who are employing the same model- months before hand we spent time observing what others were doing in regards to online ordering to get an idea how it would work for our own operation. This can include sharing product codes and layouts between organizations who use the same system so you do not have to start from scratch.
- Evaluate your space- Prepare how an online ordering system can change your operational layout. Refrigeration/Freezer equipment and shelving need to be moved so there is an overall flow to your design and products need to be labeled and stored so there is little guess work for a volunteer. Be prepared to make last minute changes when something doesn't go according to plan.
- Shelving in the pantry is numbered- when the client is done ordering and receipt tape is printed to allow the volunteer to pack the items based on what the client ordered. Receipts give the following info: shelf number, product name, and quantity ordered to allow the volunteer to easily pack ordered items.
- Keep some inventory categories broad- Instead of inventorying and listing every single product that comes into the pantry- try to generalize some products for the sake of time and efficiency. For example: "Short Pasta"- includes elbow, penne, rotini, etc. Rather than creating a listing for every single category and type of product.
- Preparing volunteer staff/clientele- Keep volunteers informed of changes as you develop a plan to move into online ordering. Train volunteers extensively, and allow time for support as you make an online transition. Clientele should be informed of new protocols and given support to be able to place online orders efficiently.
- Changes to volunteer roles- Volunteers now pack orders based on what clients order on the kiosks at the pantry, rather than taking clients around and letting them know what they are allowed to choose from. Food must be sorted, organized and counted based on the way you designate product in your system, rather than placed on shelf directly to distribute.

Operational Changes:

- SmartChoice is web-based and clients order from two touch screen kiosks located at our office. There is currently no "app" required- just a link to the website. This can be accessed from smartphone, tablet or personal computer.
- Efficiency: SmartChoice has allowed us to cut down time in the waiting room, and has allowed us to take more clients within the time frame that we offer pantry.

- Less stigmatizing for volunteer and client: SmartChoice is programmed to know what each client is qualified for in terms of food designation- creating a less stigmatizing environment for volunteer & client.
- Remote ordering feature: SmartChoice is programmed with a Remote Ordering feature that allows clients to order off-site. This feature employs our Food Pantry Without Walls Program by allowing residents from two low income senior housing units order food and have it delivered same day.

Client Response:

In the initial startup- I had a lot of concerns. A lot of our clientele are seniors, may have low reading skills, or little computer skills that could make online ordering challenging. Smartchoice has a lot of user-friendly features that makes ordering easy. Product listings include pictures, translations, dietary information, and product size and descriptions. Over a year into using SmartChoice, many of our clients have reached a point of proficiency in being able to place orders on their own. For those that still have challenges ordering, we have a volunteer at the kiosk to assist clients with the system. In regards to our Food Pantry Without Walls Program, the “Remote Ordering” feature has allowed us to go into areas of high concentrations of food insecurity and deliver food to participants who would not be able to otherwise reach the pantry due to many barriers such as- transportation, mobility or stigma. These participants are very pleased with the program, and we have seen significant growth as well as a large percentage of these seniors ordering on their own devices remotely.

Challenges:

- Have a Plan B for when internet cuts out or stops working. We have used mobile hot-spots to remediate a lost internet connection that prevents ordering.
- Space: we had to overcome some of our spacing difficulties in our pantry to allow for a streamlined operation.
- Volunteer integration: giving the volunteer the correct training to be successful in the jobs they are given. There are more steps that need to be taken for inventory and procedures, so relaying these correctly and clearly to the volunteer is very important so inventory is accurate.