

Behind the Scenes – On-Time Grocery Delivery

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In late 2021, the concept of urban fulfillment centers started gaining popularity. One would say the COVID-19 pandemic was a major contributor to its success. These dark stores are optimized grocery retail spaces that focus on fast and accurate delivery to customers. This model is being widely adopted by popular delivery service giants to compete with Amazon and Instacart as customers turn to increased online grocery shopping.



Image 1: Urban Fulfillment Center or Dark Store

Orders are placed through a delivery app platform, and customers can pick from thousands of items to be delivered to their doorstep in a matter of minutes. Urban fulfillment centers, as seen in Image 1 are present in the cities in which they operate. These stores have their operations streamlined for timeliness and order accuracy to deliver the best service to the customers and in turn, increase their revenue. The nationwide chain of stores has seen a positive response from the public and this is just the beginning. Through an extensive menu, local vendor collaborations, weekly discounts and holiday campaigns, these companies are becoming a permanent and sought-after fixture of the community. However, in chasing profits and satisfying every customer's desire and want, it seems some companies do not care about inventory shrinkage and grocery items wastage.

Time to Act is Now

In September 2022, I walked through the red doors of Seneca for my first class in the Supply Chain Management program. September 2022 was also my first month as an associate at one such Urban fulfillment center. I would always relate and connect every concept taught in class to my day-to-day tasks at the fulfillment center. Something that made me uncomfortable was the number of products we had to dispose of due to poor quality, expiration, or damaged nature. Our store had just begun operations and we were slowly and steadily building our customer base. However, with 10 or 150 orders a week, we have to maintain a said amount of inventory to meet growth and contingencies. Call it a teething issue or ineffective planning, the amount of food and convenience products that were being thrown in the garbage bins would break my heart each day.



Image 2: Daily discarded lot due to near expiration date

Through a Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility course taught during my time as a student here at Seneca, I believe I was able to open my mind and change my thinking about sustainability and what it represents.

“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.” – Barack Obama

Some sites and stores have connected with local food banks and food donation groups to come weekly and collect everything that is in decent, edible, and salvageable condition. Other stores try selling the same products until they go bad at a marked-down price and still there are some stores left that just cannot do anything about the matter. My team is responsible for ensuring we have the best quality of products on the racks for our end customers and discarding anything that falls below the standards set by the company. These standards are

set in place after considering various scenarios and conditions. Most of the products that are taken off are still in good condition for consumption within a day or two. This is where I decided it was time for action. It began with a small step of going through the discarded lot and keeping aside anything proper and decent for my closest friends in class. With time, the number of people happily taking off the items from me grew. I was quite surprised by this response as no one wants a deformed potato or two liters of milk two days before expiry. Very soon, the lot that was being discarded had nothing or only those items that were in very bad condition as I took away everything and gave it a second chance at seeing through its lifecycle. Whoever collected an item from me, I only left them with a big thank you and a word of caution to double check the item before consuming it. Fast forward to early 2023 and everyone is hit with inflation, rising prices and dwindling profits. As companies scurry to break even and save on unnecessary costs, our stores followed suit. In-depth studies into customer ordering patterns and inventory variances led to smaller replenishment sizes and less frequent supply runs. As a result, the amount being thrown was significantly reduced as the focus moved towards saving costs, cutting expenses and still managing to keep the customer happy. Even though the problem of food wastage was not at the top of the priority list, the issue got addressed because of this and that made me content.

Harsh Reality

Most often, big restaurant and grocery chains do not allow for any discarded (form or quality) product to be used due to fear of being taken to court for health safety concerns and this contributes the most towards food wastage. Not all that is thrown away or meant to be thrown away has seen out its proposed life and just creates an extra burden on landfills. It is very difficult to bring down food components and this food waste rots and produces methane which harms the environment. It is very important for every person to plan and shop carefully. If needed, shop more often to avoid any excess purchasing or even freeze items that will sustain. Food wastage is a major problem for many cities around the world and all of us have to pitch in if we are to save this planet we call home.

Too Good to Miss

Many organizations and groups are trying to do good in our communities. One of them that I strongly recommend and share with my friends and colleagues is 'Too Good To Go' (Image 3). It is an application-based platform that seeks to reduce food waste by connecting people with restaurants and grocery stores to provide affordable meals. Individuals can purchase quality food at reduced prices from several popular restaurants like Pizza Pizza, Tim Hortons and Metro within their community. It is a brilliant strategy to target the city's food wastage

problem and at the same time, help save money on meals.

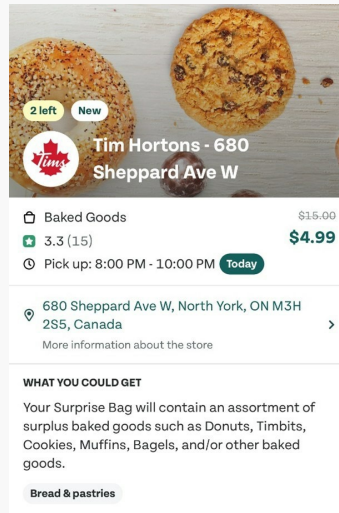


Image 3: Too Good To Go

Eye Opener – Conclusion

The theoretical concepts of sustainability have always seemed overwhelming, however, the last four months at Seneca changed that for me and for others like me. A well-versed and experienced industry professional took up the helm of educating the class on best practices and real issues through interactive sessions and activity-based learning. As eager students, this allowed us to perceive the environmental, social, and economic issues around us. Above all, it showed us a way to effectively contribute to improving conditions around us, even if it was just 1%. It is a common notion for many to shy away from anything that reads 'sustainability or sustainable development' as it is felt that it requires extra effort and funds. All credit is due to the professor who opened our eyes to this and made us realize that it is all about awareness and choices. Somewhere between skimming through the presentations to score on the test and looking for ecolabels and identifying brands that are going above and beyond for the environment, we all changed for the better.

As customers, we are more than happy to always shift the blame and burden on the companies and brands to be more socially responsible and focus on environmental issues. As companies looking to sustain themselves against competition and satisfy the shareholders, we are always looking to pass the ball to the customers with minimal efforts taken in the name of doing better for the economy and the planet. Through increased awareness and rising concern for our planet and surroundings, there has been a shift in preferences and consumption habits which is changing the behaviour of customers and companies alike. Six months ago, I would not deviate from my shopping list but now I find myself looking for ecolabels and reading more about brands that are doing good for the

environment. As humans, we rely on fate and believe in the thought that everything happens for a reason. We want to change but continue to wait for the right moment or opportunity. I believe this moment and opportunity was when I sat through my first sustainability class and clocked out after day one at my new job. There has been no looking back after that. It takes a great deal of effort, energy, and time to collect, pack, and transport discarded food and grocery items daily but the excited faces of my friends and colleagues brimming with gratitude and appreciation make me do it again, each day.

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References:

Image 1: Photo by [Aaron Doucett](#) on [Unsplash](#)

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