



Double Up Food Bucks has brought new customers into Balls Food Stores. (Photo courtesy of the Fair Food Network)

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Balls sees 'win-win' with SNAP produce pilot

Liz Webber | Nov 23, 2015

A pilot program at Balls Food Stores that rewards Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program recipients for spending their benefits on local produce has been a “win-win” for customers, farmers and the retailer, said Balls

COO Mike Beal.

Called Double Up Food Bucks, the program essentially doubles the amount of produce SNAP recipients can buy: Each time a customer buys local produce with his or her EBT card and uses a store loyalty card, an amount equal to the produce purchase (up to \$25 per day) is added to the loyalty account to spend on any produce at a later date.

“And so the idea is to get healthier food to people who could take advantage of it because it’s stretching — both stretching their food dollar but also giving them healthier food because it’s local produce. We just see that as a win-win,” said Beal.

The Double Up program was started by the non-profit Fair Food Network in 2009 in a handful of Detroit farmers’ markets before expanding Michigan-wide to markets and a few independent retailers. SpartanNash came on board with some of its Family Fare stores in 2014.

Kansas City, Kan.-based Balls heard about the program from Diana Endicott, owner of Good Natured Family Farms, a network of 150 local farmers that has supplied the retailer for a dozen years.

“And the more I heard about it, I thought, that’s a slam dunk for us because we’ve already got our local produce growers, local ranchers — but this is all for produce — that we work with. We’ve got the technology in place. The changes that we’d need to make are minimal. And we think we could have some fun with it. So we gave it a shot,” said Beal.

Balls worked with Good Natured Family Farms and the Fair Food Network to pilot Double Up Food Bucks in four of its Price Chopper stores starting last summer, later adding a fifth store. Three of the stores are in Kansas and two are in Missouri.





Fair Food Network assists retailers with marketing materials and in-store signs. (Photo courtesy of Fair Food Network)

Eligible produce items are identified with signage in the store. Over the course of the growing season, Balls stocks over 100 local produce items.

Funding for the Double Up program at Balls was provided by the Franciscan Sisters of Mary, with additional support from the Healthcare Foundation of Greater Kansas City via the Mid-America Regional Council, according to Fair Food Network communications director Emilie Engelhard.

The Double Up program as a whole was initially paid for by private philanthropy. However, the 2014 Farm Bill created a grant program administered by the USDA for SNAP produce incentive programs. In 2015 the Fair Food Network received \$5.1 million — and raised matching private funds for a total of \$10.4 million — to expand Double Up in Michigan.

A network of like-minded programs, including Double Up, in Kansas and Missouri has joined together to apply for a USDA grant for 2016.

Many programs start out at farmers' markets, but supermarkets like Balls are critical for reaching large numbers of consumers, said Engelhard.

“And so in this way it’s really a win-win-win,” said Engelhard. “It helps low-income consumers who need it most stretch their food dollars to bring

home more healthy food. It benefits area farmers selling local produce. And in the grocery store setting it benefits grocery stores by helping bring people into the store and providing a distinguishing edge in the marketplace.”

The United Fresh Produce Association has also worked to get more retailers involved in SNAP incentives. Two of the other 2015 USDA grant beneficiaries are an AARP program that will work with Kroger stores in Mississippi and Tennessee, and the Washington State Department of Health, which plans to involve 168 Safeway stores along with 86 farmers’ markets and CSAs.

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H-E-B and Walmart have also expressed interest in SNAP incentive programs, according to United Fresh president and CEO Tom Stenzel.

“It’s a hard thing for a retail chain to stop and do a pilot program like this. But there’s a lot of interest. You think about the SNAP dollar, we’re talking like \$80 billion a year now — \$80 billion — in SNAP money that’s coming into the grocery industry. And how can you channel more of that into the produce department? It’s important for people’s health, it’s important for the stores — it’s one of the highest margin businesses in supermarkets,” said Stenzel.

Moreover, that \$80 billion doesn’t account for the additional money SNAP recipients might spend in a grocery store beyond their benefits, he noted.

At Balls, redemption rates for Double Up Food Bucks soared 70% from July to August. The retailer has over 3,000 customers participating.

“It’s been a huge win for actually not just our customers but customers that

are new to us because of the program,” said Beal.

Balls’ nonprofit partners helped get the word out to SNAP recipients by sending out flyers, putting up billboards and running a Facebook advertising campaign.

At the same time, a key factor in the program’s success at Balls is employees in the stores, Engelhard said.

“There’s such incredible buy-in by Balls Foods at all levels, from executive leadership to the cashiers, about why this program is important and benefiting the shoppers that come to their store.”

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