

## **“SERVING YOU” ASSESSMENT SHOPPING AGENCIES FOCUS GROUPS**

- **CONSOLIDATED INPUT FROM THREE FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS HELD AT MANNA HEADQUARTERS FEBRUARY 5, 6 AND 7, 2013.**
- **REPRESENTATIVES FROM SIXTEEN PARTNER AGENCIES PARTICIPATED (ATTACHMENT).**
- **MANNA REPRESENTATIVES INCLUDED SUSAN SCHWARTZ (DOCUMENTATION), KATIE ELDER (TIMEKEEPER AND FACILITATION ASSISTANCE) AND JIM MATHEWS (FACILITATOR).**

### **I. PHYSICAL ACCESS - DISTRIBUTION FLOOR LAYOUT**

Comments regarding current distribution floor layout were mixed. With present layout:

Positives:

1. Agencies' need to continuously lift boxes is decreased, which is helpful.
2. Items are now sorted better, which limits the need for (and chaos of) picking through products

Problems Noted:

1. Difficult seeing into boxes, especially on highest rack. Agencies recognize advantage to MANNA (ease of restocking, etc.) but this makes it harder for older and/or shorter shoppers who cannot access these products.
2. Current arrangement does not allow “flow” of shopping that previously existed. Some feel they have gone from a logical, “left to right” movement along the old aisles to more of a random grab approach.
3. Major consternation exists related to overcrowding, primarily driven by the size of the carts and their associated physical risks (tripping, bumping, etc.). Also, people often don't distinguish another agency's cart from MANNA stock and pull product that another agency has already selected.

- RECOMMENDATIONS from agencies:

- A. Space permitting, do not have agencies push the large carts around the distribution floor. Provide small, maneuverable carts that can hold one or two banana boxes. Fill those and then offload to the larger cart that is in a staging area for checkout.
- B. Have agency nameplates/tags, similar to what the individuals now wear, that could be hung from large carts, thus

preventing other agencies from mistaking them as available MANNA products.

- C. Better signage on products (larger, more distinct), as well as keeping the white board up to date that lists freezer and cooler contents.
- D. Provide a small “display” area that would have a single sample of each available item, thus allowing agencies to see what is available throughout the distribution area.
- E. Strictly enforce appointment times, number of people agencies can have on the floor and time limitations.
- F. Consider grouping appointment times by agency size. For example, an “X-Large Agency Day” might allow MANNA to focus on accommodating large quantities, whereas a “Small Agency Day” might focus on small, individual selections.
- G. Consider separating the large, iced cakes from other bakery products (cookies, muffins, etc.). The former are used by only a few agencies (e.g., for a welcome table) and clutter up the other bakery products that most agencies need.

## II. VARIES ROOM

General reaction to varies room is very positive. In particular, agencies:

- 1. Like the ability to see and select produce & bread products themselves, thus avoiding the need for staff to tell them what’s “back there” and waiting for it to be brought out.
- 2. Believe this ability to select items helps them control the quality of those products and is a more efficient use of MANNA staff time.

Problems Noted:

- 1. Only two out of the sixteen participating agencies commented that the Varies room is chaotic and disorderly, but this appeared mostly a reaction to crowding, as well as some agencies who pick through items and leave a mess.
- 2. Varies room crowding now largely associated with the fact that, while a good concept, it is too narrow to adequately serve its purpose. Agencies noted the presence of pallets on both sides and agency carts moving in both directions in a very limited space.
  - RECOMMENDATIONS from agencies included:
    - A. If possible within future space limitations, dedicate a larger (wider) space to the Varies room.

- B. Place banana boxes in the room so that agencies don't have to go back and forth to the Distribution floor for boxes when they are making selections in the Varies room.
- C. For smaller agencies and/or smaller individual product needs, provide paper bags in the Varies room to assist with selection.
- D. Pre-bagged items are great and agencies would love to see more of this.
- E. To the extent possible, have bread products only on the rolling racks, not in the huge corrugated boxes. The latter results in smashed products, ripped plastic bags, limited visibility to what's available, etc.
- F. Agencies would like for the Varies room to expand, essentially becoming a walk-in cooler to accommodate more products, but recognize that this is a refrigeration issue.

### III. PRODUCT SELECTION AND QUALITY

Comments were generally very positive regarding product selection and quality, and agencies understand that MANNA's ability to provide products is limited by its own sources. Other observations and recommendations included:

1. Paper products, which are a great value to agencies (largely due to cost savings) appear to be in greater supply lately. If there is something MANNA is doing to increase its sourcing of paper products, please continue doing so.
2. Some agencies would like to see limitations on the ability to select "random" products that are sometimes brought out in the large corrugated containers. Specific examples included the occasional vacuum cleaner, car seat, baby strollers or other items that could be costly if purchased. They feel that if the number of items selected is not limited, agencies that get to these on a first come, first served basis get a huge cost advantage.
3. Regarding quality, agencies noted that produce can vary greatly, and is impacted not only by shelf life but by being at the top versus bottom of a container. They like the pre-sorting (and culling of poor quality products) into bags, etc. that volunteers are able to do for some items. There was a strong recommendation to do more of this, resources permitting.
4. Several negative comments emerged relative to the quality of fruit, especially the pre-packaged, cut fruit. Many said they no longer even look at these items.
5. Several comments (mostly negative) related to certain soup products. Some agencies commented that some soups from a particular vendor (Southgate?

Southside?) are of poor quality. One specific comment (from two different agencies) was that the chicken noodle soup from this vendor was “vile”.

6. Agencies who buy in case lots would like to see more variety available. Examples of products that would be highly desirable include canned fruit, syrups (especially low/no sugar syrups), sugar, cooking oil, dried and canned beans, mayonnaise (especially low-fat), and shelf stable milk.
7. Several agencies noted the recent difficulty and limitations on getting eggs, but understand there are guidelines MANNA is following to “pre-screen” each egg and that this is a driving factor behind the reduced supply.
8. Since some agencies can utilize goods in large containers (e.g., gallon cans of vegetables, institutional ketchup/mustard dispensers) but others cannot. Thus, consider separating products out by container size.

#### **IV. COST ISSUES**

Cost considerations vary from agency to agency. At one extreme, some (particularly smaller agencies) acknowledge that the ability to select no-charge products (e.g., bakery, dairy) is essential to their shopping strategy. Others, on a relative basis, have larger and more stable funding sources and thus more leeway in selecting needed items. Nonetheless, several points were noted that apply across the board:

1. All agencies, including those relatively well funded, are very careful in the use of available monies. Even if they have the ability to pay shared maintenance fees, they will shop elsewhere if the products are meaningfully cheaper. Several noted that, when buying in case lots, they frequently are able to purchase canned meats and vegetables, along with certain other items, cheaper at other places (Aldi’s was most frequently cited). They would much prefer to buy from MANNA but cannot overlook these discrepancies if substantial.
2. There was strong support for MANNA increasing its co-op buying (as well as bulk purchases for repackaging). Agencies believe some of the price discrepancies they now see (e.g., MANNA versus Aldi’s, noted above in #1), would be overcome if MANNA were to negotiate with those vendors in quantity and pass on the savings to the agencies.
3. Co-op buying was also suggested as a possible solution to the egg “shortage” that has resulted from the need to inspect each one individually.
4. Overall budgets are greatly impacted by the availability, or lack thereof, of SNAP and TEFAP. One noted that they will spend \$200-250/week at MANNA when those programs are plentiful, versus \$600+/week when SNAP and TEFAP are gone.

5. Relative to SNAP and TEFAP, a question arose (several times) as to whether those limits are MANNA imposed or government imposed (we did not know the answer) and why the limits would not be different based on agency size.
6. (Note only): One agency questioned why they could not use MANNA product for fundraising events. We did not have an answer at the time, but speculated that this was policy imposed outside of MANNA. Susan later provided the Feeding America policy with this condition and we still need to provide this feedback.
7. Discussion on an annual fee versus a “per pound” shared maintenance fee was discussed in the first session. The reaction was quite negative and our ability to respond to all of the concerns this raised was clearly inadequate. We did not raise this issue in the latter two sessions.
8. Perhaps MANNA could be more aggressive in lowering prices on slow moving items. One example was large frozen turkeys, which agencies noted were not moving, but that they could not afford at the standard price. This might also make it easier for an agency feeding a large number of families to provide each with something that large, which they could not do otherwise due to cost limitations.

## **V. PRODUCE SPECIFIC DISCUSSION**

Agencies appear generally to be “pushing” produce with their clients and are thus supportive of utilizing increased amounts that MANNA can provide. For some less common items (e.g., certain squashes, etc.) they are seeing a learning curve, especially when agencies suggest approaches to preparation, which is increasing consumption of these products

Some comments below are repetitive of the above notes, but are nonetheless grouped here under “Produce”.

1. It is very helpful to have volunteers culling products for quality. Agencies see a lot of advanced spoilage, especially toward the bottom of large containers, and the volunteer efforts minimize this to a great extent.
2. Pre-bagging of certain produce is also a great benefit as it includes a quality control (as above in item 1) and allows more specific quantity selection.
3. Some agencies would like to see MANNA open on Saturday, especially when large produce shipments come in late in the work week that would otherwise sit until Monday.
4. There is broad appreciation for the “flash” emails that go out when MANNA has large quantities of produce available on short notice.

5. Opening 2-4 p.m. on certain days for shoppers to come to MANNA for produce and bread is well received, but does not seem to be broadly utilized. Some agencies said they are taking advantage of this, but others seemed not to be aware of the opportunity.
6. Discussion was well received regarding a potential “farmers market” concept to distribute out to certain agencies, by pre-agreement, large quantities of produce that MANNA receives on short notice.
7. Agencies are routinely looking for other opportunities besides MANNA to source fresh produce. Many have been successful in developing farm-to-agency strategies.

## **VI. PREBOXING CERTAIN PRODUCTS**

The concept of pre-boxing certain items to implement a “guaranteed contents” approach (and thus avoid hand sorting such items) was very well received in all sessions. Categories discussed included a) mixed vegetables; b) Fruits; c) Entrees, soups, beans; d) desserts; e) canned meats. Agencies had only two material requests related to the pre-boxing concept:

1. If no sorting is allowed, stick to this very strictly. Since contents are “guaranteed”, they should be on a “take it or leave it” basis.
2. Since agencies that principally shop for a limited number of clientele may not need the above categories of products in case quantities, ensure that these same products are available for individual selection as well.

## **VII. MANNA STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS**

Without exception, agencies were highly complementary of Glenda, Curtis and Kevin for their helpfulness and consistently positive attitudes (it should be noted that this view was frequently expressed about the entire MANNA staff as well). With respect to the functions and utilization of staff and volunteers, the following observations and suggestions emerged:

1. With the Distribution staff so busy re-stocking, unloading, etc., additional volunteer assistance, if available, would be good. This would help agency personnel looking for products, needing assistance lifting heavy items, etc.
2. Such volunteers, again if possible, should be the “regulars” who get to know the Distribution area well so they can “sub” (to some extent) for Curtis, Glenda and Kevin in the “customer assist” functions.

3. It would be very useful to have a volunteer outside to assist agencies in loading their vehicles. Several agencies noted the “chaos” and “danger” of heavy boxes piling down the rollers and the bottleneck this causes when the loading process cannot keep up. Often too, it was noted, older individuals are attempting to load vehicles with boxes that they cannot handle.

## **VIII. SCHEDULING**

Discussion of scheduling was quite limited, though many agencies did note that they shop and distribute on the same day, so it is essential to have a morning shopping appointment. In addition, the availability of both people and vehicles influences this and most people want to do it early so that it doesn't tie up most of the day.

Two comments/suggestions of note:

1. Evening shopping hours might work for some, but this clearly would have an impact on MANNA staffing.
2. The 2-4 p.m. window allowing agencies to return beyond their normal shopping hours for produce and bakery is helping some with their scheduling. This, for example, helps them utilize their capacity better (both vehicle and storage facilities) and allows them to have fresher products.

## **IX. MISCELLANEOUS INPUT**

Participating MANNA staff felt that the following comments and suggestions were also constructive but do not necessarily fall into one of the above categories:

1. There was a strong voice of support from Albert Lyons, Etowah Fishes and Loaves, for the pre-packaging that Diane's staff is doing for him. While he indicates this process took some smoothing out, primarily to understand better what specific products he would be getting, this is now working very well. If this could take the load of other X-Large agencies off the shopping floor, expansion of this approach may be useful.
2. Agencies appreciate the opportunity for specificity in the ordering process. To the extent they now can indicate items they particularly do or do not want, they like this very much. However, they would also like MANNA to provide as much information as possible in the online system regarding products – e.g., brands, “sell-by dates”, etc.

3. Agencies appear very sensitive to the issue of past-date items. They understand that many items are good past the “sell-by” date, but now feel the burden is on them to decide whether to distribute products that are past date. They would like MANNA to provide guidelines regarding past date use of various product categories as specific guidance to the partner agencies.
4. Many agencies are confused about the calendar of availability of TEFAP and SNAP. Some believe these are only intended to be available for one-half or two-thirds of each quarter, while others assume the intention is to have 13 weeks per quarter of availability. (NEED HELP WITH THIS ONE, AS I DON'T REALLY UNDERSTAND THE ISSUES).
5. When MANNA pre-packages food, agencies would appreciate a focus on the quality of bagging material. They indicate that some items bagged at MANNA (e.g. pretzels, rice) are in such flimsy bags that they easily break open and are often not usable.

## **ATTACHMENT – PARICIPATING AGENCIES**

**Biltmore Church of Christ**

**Kids at Work**

**Bethel Rural**

**Bethel Rural**

**ABCCM – South**

**Calvary Episcopal**

**Children First**

**Go Kitchen Ready**

**Loving Food Resources**

**Biltmore Church of God**

**Haywood Baptist Association**

**Mountain Area Child & Family**

**Etowah Fishes & Loaves**

**Food for Fairview**

**East Asheville Welcome Table**

**St. Dunstan's Group Home**

