

Click and you shall receive: Online grocery shopping expanding in Bakersfield

BY DOROTHY MILLS-GREGG | Aug 5, 2017



Hate going to the grocery store? Or just don't have time for it? Then you're going to want to keep reading.

Online grocery store ordering — and in some cases delivering — is a growing business in Bakersfield.

The most recent to get in the game is Walmart, which this past week launched a new grocery "pickup" service at three stores in Bakersfield and one in Delano.

Go to a website, pick out your groceries, then drive to the store and have an associate load up your wares.

Other services that predate Walmart's new one make it even easier. Vons and Albertsons will deliver groceries you order online right to your door.

"I read some people believe it to be lazy," said Michelle Lynam, a licensed childcare provider and preschool teacher in Bakersfield who has to plan meals for 14 children and so orders groceries online. "But when you work as much as I do and have such a busy schedule with family and so little relaxation, those minutes or hours become precious."

"I can sit and enjoy a cocktail after a long day and shop at my own pace and it will get delivered within my time frame for little or no cost."

Lynam likes Vons because it delivers, and while there's a small cost (see side bar) she watches out for specials and digital coupons.

Occasionally she'll use Amazon Prime Pantry, but that doesn't have a wide selection and there's no fresh produce as Amazon Fresh is not available in Bakersfield yet.

Walmart still makes you drive to its stores, but at least you don't have to get out of your car. Local Walmart Neighborhood Market Store Manager Jaime Diaz recounted the story of one of his first pickup customers.

The new mother of twins pulled up with her babies asleep in the back seat and had all her goods loaded up for her, Diaz said. No leaving the car's air conditioning, no walking through triple-digit heat to get what she needed.

Diaz said the service also helps those who are working, older or planning a party.

"If you're at work, the last thing you want to do is to go here and shop," he said.

Bakersfield's online grocery pickup and delivery options are currently limited to large chain stores, but third-party delivery services could be on their way here.

Envoy is geared toward older adults who want to maintain their independence at home and could use someone to provide help with practical, everyday needs, which include grocery delivery. Their services are provided on-demand and also include transportation and check-ins.

Spokeswoman Madison Mathis said Envoy has seen a lot of interest in its services in Bakersfield and hopes to have its carefully screened employees working here soon.

Then there's also Instacart, which can deliver groceries to your door within hours of your order. Customers can also create their list over time and set a delivery for days in advance.

Apoorva Mehta started Instacart five years ago in San Francisco when he became tired of going to the grocery store, plus he doesn't own a car, said company spokeswoman Dacyl Armendariz.

She said she was a fan of the company before she started working there. For her, the hassle of going grocery shopping is looking for parking and going on Sundays when it's crowded and most of the food is gone.

"I love not having to do that anymore," Armendariz said.

When she had to serve her entire family on Thanksgiving, Armendariz said, she used Instacart and was amazed at all the food she got without stressing at the store during one of the busiest times of the year.

Instacart has grown to serve 90 markets and has a goal of reaching 80 percent of households by 2018. It is currently at 46 percent, but Bakersfield is not yet included.

Armendariz remembered a recent study that said paying others to do tasks for you, like cleaning or grocery shopping, can increase happiness.

Shopping for groceries online is part of a growing trend of people buying items over the internet — though customers buy food at a lower rate, at least 30 percent less, than buying electronics, books or clothing online, according to Invesp, a company that helps others optimize their websites so viewers become customers.

How does this affect the local economy?

"This means that there is less demand for retail spaces and, with current construction going on in quite a few retail stores, you can expect to see probably a lot more 'blighted' retail centers (i.e., older) that shops move away from," Cal State Bakersfield Assistant Professor of Economics Richard Gearhart said in an email.

He gave an example of stores leaving Valley Plaza Mall to go to a newer shopping center.

However, Gearhart said online shopping does not have a significant impact on the local economy.

"In terms of shipping and distribution, this allows for a variety of low-skill jobs to open up in large distribution centers where items are warehoused," he said in the email. "This is a positive, as it allows for job and wage growth, but also allows substitutes for workers who have been laid off in other low-skill jobs."

He said at most the loss in total employment income for retail sales workers is about \$20 million, which is offset by an increase in income for distribution workers of about \$15 million.

"As a reference point, our GDP is about \$35 billion annually," Gearhart said, "meaning that these numbers are less than 0.1% of our local economy."

Studies on the broad umbrella of online shopping have shown that people who are male, have a graduate degree or who make \$80,000-plus are more likely to shop online.

Sixty-two percent of U.S. consumers with internet service shop online at least once a month, Invesp has reported.

But back in the realm of grocery shopping, some call the online way "lazy."

"I can understand that this would be great for the disabled or the single parent working two jobs but for the rest of us, just quit being lazy," Chandra Beaty said on Facebook.

For the people who do use it, like mother of three Shana Stevenson, it's a time-saver.

"I would say I save at least three hours a week," she said in an email. "One hour at the grocery store, another hour at Target and travel/wrangling kids time."

(Target offers pickup of general merchandise but not produce and meat locally.)

Stevenson said for items other than grocery ones, which she gets from Vons and now Walmart, she uses Target pickup because she can designate her husband to grab the order as he heads home from work.

"No one gets frustrated because the wrong kind was bought or because they can't find it," she said, "and I don't have to make last-minute runs with tired kids."

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