



Crossroads Resource Center

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Tools for Community Self-determination

Evaluating your "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" foods campaign

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Knowing whether your Buy Fresh Buy Local (BFBL) campaign is achieving its goals is not always easy. Food systems are very complex. At times the best-intentioned effort to change a food system results in something you did not anticipate.

Still, it is important to have some way of measuring your progress. You and your partners will need to assess whether your effort is on-course, or needs to be redirected. Funders will want to know their donations are making a difference. Consumers will look for credible data that shows positive impacts. Potential investors will want a way to calculate potential return.

The time to begin thinking about evaluation is at the point that you draft your first concept paper for your early steps. Ask colleagues who have experience with using evaluation to recommend several potential evaluators you can interview, to see which one offers the best fit for your effort. Ask these professionals how they approach their work, what experience they have with food systems, and what they will deliver to you. A supportive evaluator may even become in some respects an extra member of your work team, offering insights that are detached from the political fray. This may help you achieve your goals, and identify future challenges more directly. If you feel a potential evaluator is going to be primarily judgmental, consider looking for someone else.

As you structure your BFBL campaign, there are several things you can do that will help give you solid about whether your effort is succeeding. Your evaluator should be able to help. A reasonable cost for evaluation may be as much as 10% of the overall budget, depending upon the complexity of the task.

Start by measuring assets

One of the best early steps to take is to measure the assets your local farm and food system has. Folks who start by asking what is missing (for example, by doing a "needs analysis") often end up

feeling discouraged from square one. Define your strategy around your unique strengths. If you know what you *can* do before you ask what is wrong, you are more likely to feel capable of making the situation better.

Develop a "theory of change"

It is usually best for all the stakeholders in your local foods effort to make an explicit agreement about what they think can be changed given available resources. Even if things don't work out the way you planned, this still means you have an agreement about what you intend to improve, and how you will measure progress. You can more easily alter your plans to suit new conditions if your plans were explicit in the first place. Writing a "theory of change" is an effective tool for making sure all your assumptions and expectations are explicit. If you also develop specific measures that identify whether you are making the actual progress your theory of change sets out, you may avoid conflict or despair later.

One example of a theory of change: "If Earth Valley BFBL campaign spends \$500,000 to publicize local farmers markets, CSAs, and small-town butcher shops, sales of local foods in these three outlets will increase 5% over the next five years."

Develop clear measures of progress

Suppose you launch a BFBL campaign and one group of leaders thinks this means every consumer who signs up will have access to organically raised produce and meats shipped right from a nearby farm to their door. Suppose another cluster of leaders thinks this means that every supermarket within 50 miles will carry food items raised by local growers, whether organic or not. You may all launch into an effort with a great deal of enthusiasm, but one part of the group will pull one direction, while others pull toward a different goal. The whole effort might collapse simply because no one made explicit what the whole group meant by "local foods."

Now, suppose that before you write a single brochure, a group of diverse stakeholders defines success in your BFBL campaign to be that "\$250,000 of produce raised by our participating growers will be sold through five local independent grocers." If all agree at the onset that this is what you mean by success, you will at least have the same measure of your progress.

Pay attention to progress that is important, but hard to measure.

Not all the important measures are quantitative. For example, as you build a community-based food effort, you will also want to pay close attention to building community networks, and strengthening community capacities, as part of what you do. Often these social connections often cannot easily be built by strictly commercial efforts. Such social networks may be hard to measure, but your effort may well fail without them. Come up with ways to assess whether community bonds are becoming stronger as your campaign builds.

Keep track of evaluation data over time

To assess your progress, you will need data that tells you where you started, what you did, and how conditions changed. Historical data may be very useful in helping you know your context. You may need one part-time staff or consultant simply to keep track of your measurements, and to store your data on a computer so it can easily be used to assess your progress. You will need to compile data sets over time, using the same techniques each time, so that data from one year is comparable to another. You will also need a reliable data archive with proper backup.

Some key questions to raise

Following is a list of some of the questions your Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign may want to answer as it evaluates its progress. Of course, your effort will know local conditions and know which questions are most useful at different stages of your campaign. The list you ultimately use will need to reflect your local wisdom. Use this list simply to suggest local discussions you may want to have.

- How is our BFBL initiative building new capacities and skills for members of our community?
- Which capacities and skills have been built?
- What new social connections have local residents built by participating in our campaign?
- Are residents healthier?
- Do low-income people have access to fresh local foods at a fair price?
- What is the proper balance between paying farm laborers well and ensuring low-income access to food?
- Is the local food system creating wealth for most members of the community?
- What is the right balance between the foods we need to import and the foods we can produce for ourselves?
- How many local firms, agencies, and organizations have agreed to collaborate in formal networks that ensure local people have access to healthy local foods?
- How do participating partners share the *risks* of building this system as well as the *rewards*?

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