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## Cooking Matters at the Store: A Case Study of Three Missouri Counties

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## **Cooking Matters at the Store: A Case Study of Three Missouri Counties**

### **Abstract**

Cooking Matters at the Store is a grocery store tour where participants learned about healthy eating and tips for saving money on food purchases. Participants learned how to read food labels, compare unit prices, find whole grains, and three ways to purchase produce. Evaluations revealed that participants planned to use the information they learned and enjoyed the tour. A partnership with a grocery store manager is vital for the success of the program. The program incentives and working with a store that serves limited-resource audiences helped reach the intended audience.

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## **Introduction**

Families on a tight budget reported that the cost of healthy groceries is their biggest barrier to making healthy meals at home and that they had a strong interest in learning how to better budget their money for meals (Share Our Strength, 2012). "Families believe cooking healthy meals is an attainable goal and are eager for tips and educational tools that will make preparing healthy meals easier and more affordable" (Share Our Strength, 2012, p. 13). Grocery stores provide an avenue to improve healthy eating by educating consumers in the actual environment where food purchases are made. Other Extension programs have focused on education in the grocery store environment (Grogan, 1993; Wells, Stluka, & McCormack, 2015). One program that provides tips and educational tools at the grocery store is Cooking Matters at the Store.

## **Cooking Matters at the Store**

Cooking Matters at the Store highlights healthy choices from the food groups and tips for saving money at the grocery store. The four objectives of the tour are: reading food labels, comparing unit prices, finding whole grain foods, and identifying three ways to purchase produce (Share Our Strength, n.d.). The tour highlights healthy foods in all sections of the grocery store: fresh, frozen, and canned fruits and vegetables; dairy; grains (including breads and cereals); and meat, seafood,

poultry, and other protein foods. The final activity is a \$10 challenge. The \$10 challenge encourages participants to buy ingredients for a healthy meal that would feed at least four people, using at least one item from each of the five food groups, for \$10 or less. Incentives for the class include a booklet with handouts and recipes, a reusable grocery bag, and the food they purchased for the \$10 challenge.

The grocery store tour gives participants a chance to learn and practice reading food labels with canned vegetables, cereals, and whole grains. They also learn about unit prices, using cereal as one example. The bread and cereal sections offer an opportunity for participants to look for whole grains. The fresh, frozen, and canned fruit and vegetable sections provide for discussion on the benefits of purchasing all three versions of produce.

## Locations and Participants

Cooking Matters at the Store was held by the author in three grocery stores in three counties from April to July 2014. The size of the group for each tour was between two and eight participants. University of Missouri Extension partnered with Operation Food Search in Missouri in 2014 to offer this program. Operation Food Search works with a national partner, Share Our Strength, to offer Cooking Matters programming in Missouri. University of Missouri Extension has grant funding to cover the cost of the incentives, gift cards, and travel expenses for Cooking Matters at the Store. Extension specialists in Missouri who offer the program are also credited \$10 salary offset per participant. Cooking Matters at the Store has been grant funded again for 2015 for University of Missouri Extension Specialists.

## Impact

The author reached a total of 59 participants in three counties. Extension specialists used a standard evaluation developed by Share Our Strength. The evaluation captured demographic information, learning outcomes, and customer satisfaction.

The evaluation asked the following short-term learning questions: "What do you think about..."

- ...comparing unit prices to find the best deal?
- ...reading ingredient lists to find whole grains?
- ...comparing food labels to make healthy choices?

With possible responses:

- This idea is not for me.
- I am thinking about trying in the next six months.
- I am planning on trying this on my next shopping trip.
- I already did this before the tour.

Regarding customer satisfaction, participants were asked: "Overall, what did you think of this tour?" with possible responses:

- I REALLY liked this tour.
- I liked this tour.
- I neither liked nor disliked this tour.
- I did not like this tour.
- I REALLY did not like this tour.

Evaluation data for the three counties was available for 46 participants. Participants who selected "I already did this before the tour" typically had prior knowledge before the tour. Over 96% of participants planned to compare unit prices to find the best deal on their next shopping trip, or already did before the tour. Over 96% of participants planned to read ingredient lists to find whole grains on their next shopping trip, or already did before the tour. Over 94% of participants planned to compare food labels to make healthy choices on their next shopping trip, or already did before the tour. Regarding satisfaction, 78% of participants really liked the tour, while the other 22% liked the tour.

Participants in Cooking Matters at the Store had increased confidence in their ability to purchase healthier food on a budget, promoting a positive change in attitudes towards healthy foods. Those who practice healthy eating and activity behaviors are more likely to enjoy a high quality of life as an adult and into older age (Duyff, 2012). One participant said, "I learned to look for the word 'whole' when buying bread. It is important to compare unit prices because assumptions can be deceiving. Great tour! This can be very beneficial to families in this economy."

## Lessons Learned

Grocery stores provide an important partnership opportunity. The benefits to the grocery store are increased traffic, increased sales, and the potential for new customers. Partnering with a grocery store that serves limited-resource audiences helped reach this clientele when the store assists with marketing. A good relationship with the store manager is key in this endeavor. The incentives (gift card for \$10 challenge, booklets, and reusable grocery bags) helped increase attendance from limited-resource audiences. Cooking Matters at the Store is best conducted during a day of the week and time of day when store traffic is minimal. Extension specialists do not want to interfere with the normal customers of the grocery store, so determining that is important for success.

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