

VOKOMOKUM: Fair food

“VOKOMOKUM is a cooperative in Amsterdam that purchases organic and vegetarian food for its members. The monthly collection day is not only meant to pick up good food. The social aspect and the formation of a community are also important for this food collective.”

1. Introduction

VOKOMOKUM is a purchasing cooperative comprising diverse people who want to get their food in a fair and social way. Every individual in this collective is expected to contribute their part. The products are ordered once per month and can be collected on the last Friday of the month. This day is not only seen as collection day but is also designed to maintain social contacts.

VOKOMOKUM has now created a community of approximately two hundred members. They are all divided into groups and usually work a few hours every two months so the work is evenly distributed. The organic food prices are equivalent to wholesale prices plus five percent.

2. Principles

After the founder and owner of VOKOMOKUM, Elizabeth MacFadyen, moved from New York to Amsterdam, it occurred to her in 2008 that there were few options for purchasing organic food. This was very different from her former environment. In New York, dozens of shops were available with all types of organic products often supported by a cooperative. Hundreds of individuals working as a collective made it possible that organic food became affordable for people earning an average wage. Elizabeth MacFadyen thought that this must also be possible in the Netherlands.

She started VOKOMOKUM and, however, her big dream to open her own organic store has not yet been realized, VOKOMOKUM currently provides approximately two hundred families with organic food.

VOKOMOKUM provides dual advantages. On the one hand, it provides average families with affordable organic food and, on the other hand, it creates employment and supports local farmers.

VOKOMOKUM also aims to minimize the use of environmentally unfriendly materials, machinery, and vehicles. For instance, for the collection of grain at a farm ten kilometers away, the carrier cycle is preferred. In general, as much as possible is locally sourced in order to reduce CO₂ emissions in addition to supporting the local farmer.

Furthermore, the founder believes it is important to form a community. The collection day, therefore, is not only used to bring the orders to the customers but also to dine together.

3. Design

Seven years ago, VOKOMOKUM began with the aim to provide organic food for everyone regardless of income. While in New York there were many opportunities to purchase organic food, in the Netherlands, and especially in Amsterdam, this was much less the case.

VOKOMOKUM buys organic food at wholesale prices and sells them at a fixed margin of five percent. The products are sourced as much as possible from local farmers/parties. The aim is to stimulate the local economy and employment. Also, the goods are transported in a 'green' way as much as possible, for instance, with the carrier cycle. The assortment is determined by the members, and it is discussed at each meeting.

The organization, with more than 200 members, is currently in a difficult phase; will they continue to grow with the result that the current building will become too small, or will they maintain the current number of 200 members? Founder and owner Elizabeth MacFadyen is still unsure. The fact is that her dream - a profitable organic shop, open six days a week - can only become reality when the number of members of VOKOMOKUM increases.

4. Value Proposition

The organic and vegetarian food collective VOKOMOKUM believes it is important to make organic food accessible to everyone. The social contact and community that shapes the collective is considered as a very important aspect.

Founder MacFadyen had always been engaged in organic food in New York, and the fact that it was not easy to access it in the Netherlands bothered her. Because starting her own shop would be a very risky and difficult undertaking, she first investigated the demand for organic food within her own network. Today, food can be collected once a month which consequently limits the range of variety and sales. The dry goods will last for a month, however, products such as cheese, eggs, fruit, and vegetables are perishable.

VOKOMOKUM distinguished itself by maintaining good relationships with local farmers and wholesalers. The close-knit community is also very important. The founder considers the involvement of its members in the labor as a distinctive characteristic. In this aspect, the members are involved which reduces the risk that members would leave for a competing company.

Despite these good relationships with suppliers and the close-knit community, MacFadyen is aware that it is possible to copy the value proposition of VOKOMOKUM. In addition, this concept is also scalable - which is also the ambition of the founder.

5. Community

The VOKOMOKUM community consists of a cohesive group of 200 people. Every individual in this community contributes through a workgroup. The activities are diverse in nature as there are working groups which relate to IT, the selection of the orders, the transport of the goods, etc.

At the head of each group is a coordinator who makes schedules and ensures that the work is progressing in the correct manner. As a rule, each member is scheduled to work one day per every two months.

The community of VOKOMOKUM consists of a group of committed people, therefore, the outflow is very low. In contrast, the threshold to join the community is greater than a competing store which does not require work to be done.

Within the community, members communicate in an informal manner. Most contact follows mailings and, obviously, on the monthly collection day. The community is characterized by various ethnicities. There are members from the United States, South America, Asia, and Europe. There are members who are studying, buying food for their family, or are temporarily residing in the Netherlands. The outflow consists of the people who are in the Netherlands on a temporary basis, however, since this number is approximately equal to the influx of people who stay temporarily in the Netherlands, this is not entirely noticed.

6. Results

VOKOMOKUM creates values on an ecological, social, and economic level. VOKOMOKUM affords the possibility for the 200 members to purchase and consume food produced in a responsible, environmentally and animal friendly way and purchased as much as possible from local parties. For instance, their agriculture does not use poison. In addition, the transportation of goods occurs in the most environmentally friendly manner possible.

VOKOMOKUM creates economic value by selling its products at a premium of five percent above the purchasing price which is usually equivalent to wholesale prices. VOKOMOKUM can sell the products at this relatively low margin because the costs are low as each member contributes to the community. Every individual is part of a workgroup and performs tasks in groups. These people are willing to "pay" a fee in addition to the five percent increase in the form of working hours (one or two shifts per every two months). They consider it important being able to avoid traditional chains such as Albert Heijn.

Supplying these working hours, however, can also be seen as a negative value. We are living in an age where everyone has a busy schedule and finds it difficult to make time. This is also the most frequent reason that people mention that prevents them from joining.

7. Conclusion

VOKOMOKUM is a prime example of a New Business Model. Multiple values are created with the focus not being on one specific value but on keeping the balance of the environmental, economic, and social values.

This scale is indeed in balance, however, it is the social and environmental values that give the organization viability. The value created on an economic level is not sufficient for the livelihood of the owner and currently only covers the costs because of all of the work that is being performed by the members. In a society where everything and everyone around you works with money and earns money in conventional business models means that you are very dependent on volunteers/members.

The market of organic products, however, has been growing since 2000, and it is expected that this trend will continue in the coming years partly because of government support (Compendum, 2014). When the owner adheres to her principles and knows how to keep her values in equilibrium, steady growth is absolutely possible.

Address: Plantagedoklaan 8
1018 CM Amsterdam (pick-up point)
E-mail: info@vokomokum.nl
Website: <http://www.vokomokum.nl>

Case Author: Paul Bakker, Student Business Management Economics and Law, University of Utrecht