

ONLINE SHOPPING AND DELIVERY: PLANS ARE UNDERWAY

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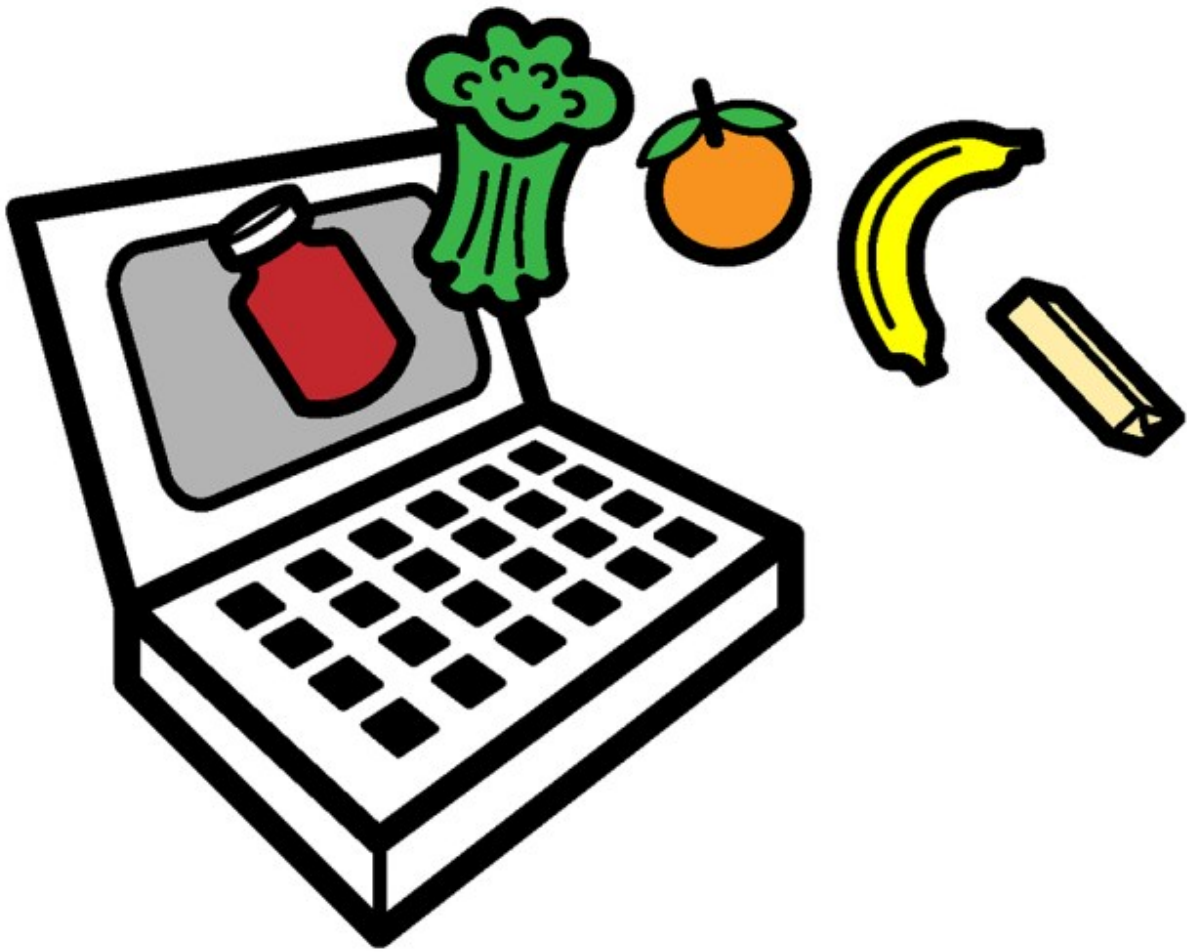


ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

By Travis Hartman

Imagine sitting in your kitchen and surveying your needs for a week’s worth of shopping, and then being able to order everything from a Park Slope Food Coop website—which hosts an online catalog of everything sold—and finally having it delivered to your door.

Or imagine waltzing into the Coop on a Sunday afternoon: there are high stacks of green shopping baskets and many carts available, and the bulk goods and vegetable aisles are easy to walk through, with no bumping into other members or murmurings of, “Excuse me, can I reach past you to grab a lemon?”

ONLINE COOP SHOPPING MIGHT BE A YEAR OR MORE AWAY BUT PLANS ARE BEING MADE.

Both of these scenarios could become reality, and are linked to the same future innovation coming to the Coop. Joe Szladek is a General Coordinator who oversees purchasing and contributes to general operations. He has been working with members of the Coop's IT department, particularly Gerald Barker and Ithran Einhorn, to get an Instacart-style system set up at the Coop that could have many benefits for shopping members. The full implementation may be a year or more away, but Szladek and his colleagues are coming close to achieving a few major milestones in the coming months.



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BEFORE THE PANDEMIC

The idea began to be discussed prior to the pandemic, during a General Meeting (G-M): helping members shop who have difficulty regularly or physically accessing the

Coop.

“There was a group of members who brought an item to a GM to pilot a home delivery program for members with mobility issues. The GM voted in favor of the item, but shortly after, the pandemic hit and slowed things down,” said Szladek.

Ironically, the pandemic only highlighted the need for such a system, but the many challenges the Coop faced during that time to simply stay open took precedence.

WHEN THE COOP IS READY TO PROCEED WITH ONLINE ORDERING, MEMBERS WILL BE ABLE TO LOG-IN ONLINE, FILL THEIR CART AND HAVE THE ITEMS DELIVERED TO THEIR HOUSE.

But since things at the Coop have stabilized, Szladek, Barker, Einhorn and others have continued working on the project, partnering with Homesome, a company that helps independent grocers build an online store.

“Homesome builds out online stores for independent grocers—they took our data and built a store based on our exact product mix. When the Coop is ready to proceed with online ordering, members will be able to log in online, fill their cart and have the items delivered to their house,” said Szladek.

“The store was built for the Coop over the past year in collaboration with Gerald, Ithran and myself—and with help from Joe Holtz as well. So, we currently have an on-line store with most of our products uploaded into it. The next step is figuring out how the Coop will go about picking orders for members, packing them up and getting them delivered,” Szladek added.

POINT-AND-CLICK PRODUCE

When the online store is up and running, a member would log in and select items they would like to purchase. That cart would then be sent along to members assigned to picking each order. There are unique aspects of the Coop that have been challenging to represent online, and Szladek is working through those details as well.

“The Coop sells many local items—like the Court Street Grocers sandwiches—that aren’t in Homesome’s product database, that we’ll have to manually enter. That will take extra time. Items like apples, that the Coop sells by the pound, will probably be selected ‘by the each’ online, because that’s an easier way for people to imagine how much they are ordering,” he said.

While Szladek envisions members doing shifts to pick orders, how many and how often are still up in the air. But, he says, limiting orders to Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays might work because that’s when the Coop isn’t as busy. It might also help reduce the traffic from shoppers who might otherwise be entering the store during busier weekend days.

“We’ll likely open up online ordering on some or all of those days, because that’s when we can afford to have more people shopping and not cause crowding issues in the aisles,” said Szladek.

Szladek is looking to even out busy shopping times, “We already feel we’re close to capacity on weekends, with the amount of members shopping on the floor—so there is a hope in my mind that we’re able to attract some of the demand from the weekends into the slower weekdays where online ordering is available.” He added that perhaps it would help spread out the overall demand more evenly throughout the week.

Once an order has been placed online and then collected by a shift worker, time would be of the essence.

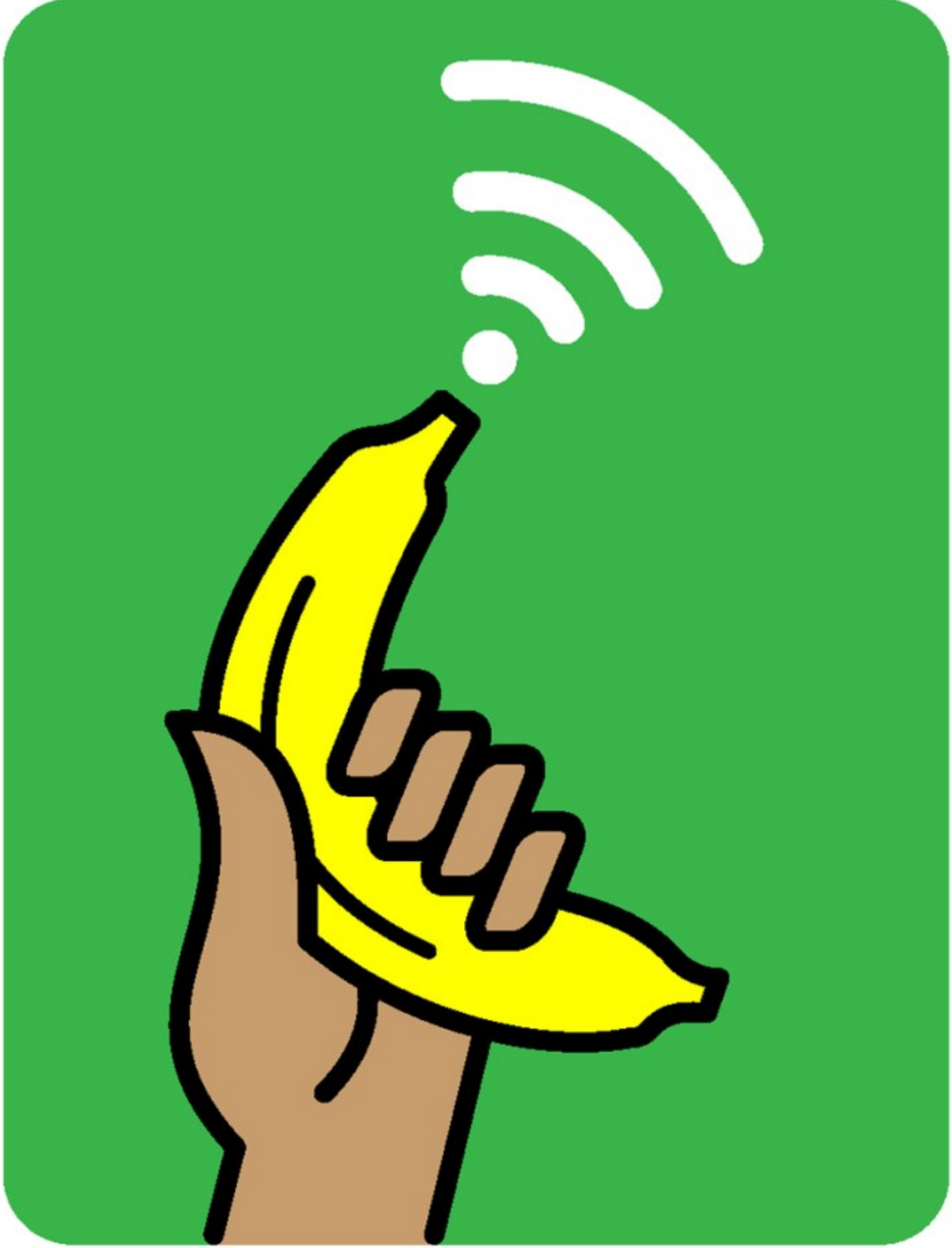


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SPACE ISSUES

“We don’t have a place to store bags of groceries that have been picked for members, particularly bags that contain items that need to be kept cold. After the member picking the order has completed and packed the shop, they can just hit the delivery button in the app and a delivery service will come to the Coop, hopefully within the next five or ten minutes, and pick up the groceries for delivery,” Szladek said.

Szladek estimates there will probably be some sort of additional fee for the delivery service, though that hasn’t been determined yet.

Szladek is optimistic about the project. While there are still several steps that have yet to be accomplished en route to the launch of online shopping at the Coop, he feels it will be a benefit to members. Online shopping at the Coop increases accessibility to members who may not be able to go to the Coop, shop and then bring home a load of groceries. Those who continue to shop in person might benefit from a less crowded store on weekends. Some members may shop online just to save time. Finally, having an online shopping option makes the Coop more resilient if another pandemic occurs in the future.

Ally Levine, a member since 2022, used online shopping during the pandemic—before she was a Coop member. “I did it while I was sick with COVID, and it was helpful to have that when I didn’t have the option to go to the store. And it was great to be able to buy fresh produce and not get takeout for every meal.”

However, she wasn’t sure if she would take part in online shopping at the Coop, as shopping is one of her favorite times of the week.

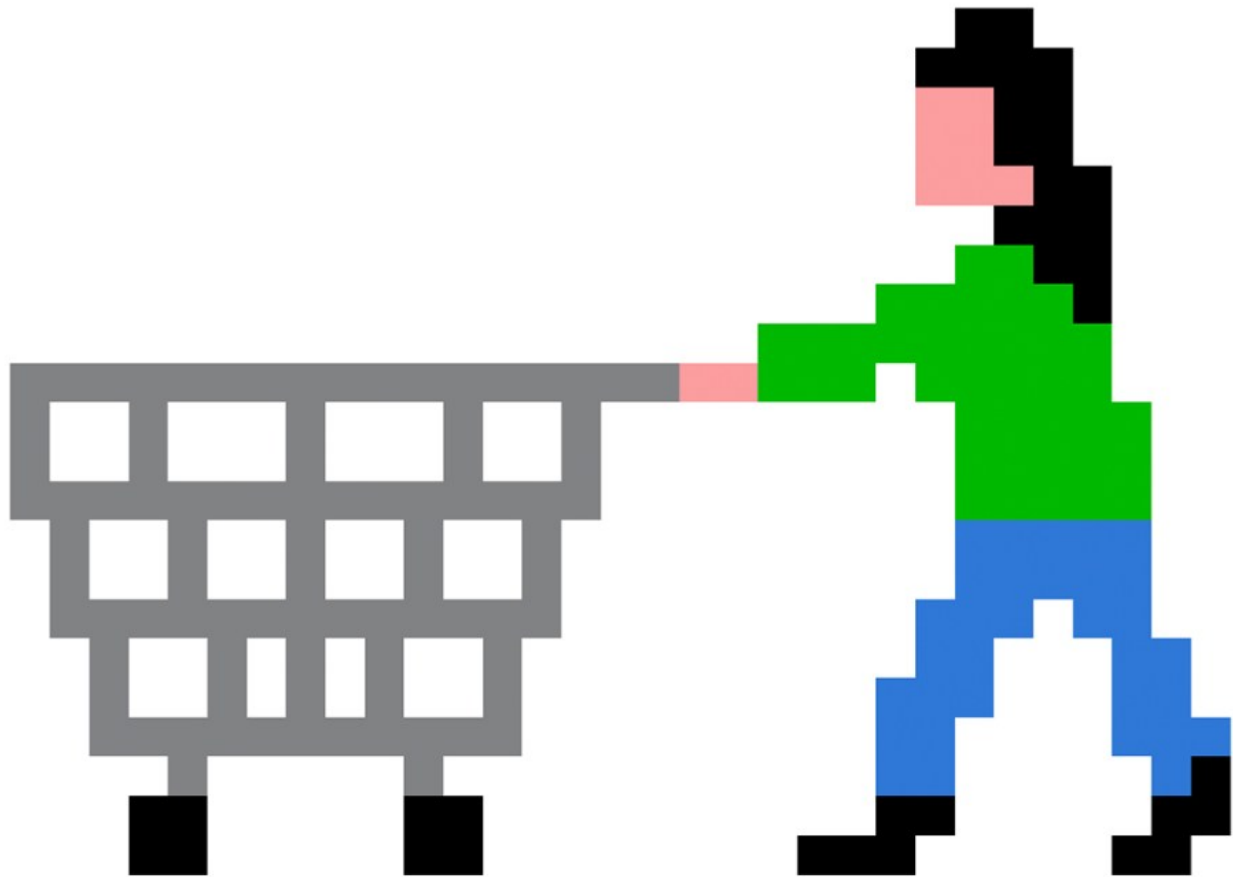


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IN-PERSON SHOPPING

“I love getting to be around beautiful produce and see what other people are buying, and I don’t think that you would get that experience when you give your shopping away to someone else—so I can’t see myself doing it very often,” said Levine.

But it is quite likely she would benefit from the reduced weekend traffic if the program takes off.

“I try to shop at strategic times because the Coop can be really busy on the weekends. I like to go at times like right before they close on a Friday or Saturday, or super early in the morning. If I didn’t have to think about that, grocery shopping would be my extra-best, first favorite time of the week!”

Travis Hartman has been a member at the Coop for over a decade and done shifts in the office upstairs, shifts with bulk processing in the basement and now at the Gazette from his desk at home.