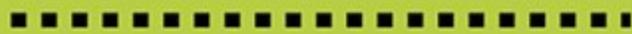




'Mooving' Towards Healthier Concessions in City of Edmonton Recreation Centers



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Moo's Healthy Food Fast (Moo's) is a locally owned restaurant in the City of Edmonton (City), Alberta. Moo's was founded by Valerie Locke and her husband in 1995 after recognizing a need to bring healthy, nutritious food to recreational and fitness centres across the City. Moo's first opened in privately-owned gyms and fitness centres and, over the years, became known across Edmonton for serving up homemade soups, breakfast wraps, smoothies, and salads.

Moo's first 17 years of successful operations in private facilities did not go unnoticed. In 2009, the City approached Moo's with an invitation to submit a proposal for the food concession operations contract at Kinsmen Sports Centre (Kinsmen). This story explores Moo's efforts to offer and promote healthy food at Kinsmen.

The Beginning of Change

In 2009, the food concession operations contract for Kinsmen was due to expire. As a result, the City began to develop Requests for Proposals (RFPs) to select a new business to take over concession operations. Although it was not the first time the contract had come up for renewal, this time the selection process was different. Within the previous two years, the City released two policy documents, which were instrumental in supporting a healthier business model at Kinsmen. First, the City released the *Operational Vending Guidelines*, which required vending machines to have at least 50% healthy items based on the *Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth* (ANGCY) (Alberta Health, 2012). This document marked a commitment by the City to increase the availability of healthy food and beverages in its recreation centres. Second, the City released *Fresh: Edmonton's Food and Agriculture Urban Strategy*, which supported locally owned businesses and recommended the promotion and sale of fresh food products (City of Edmonton, 2012). As part of the revised RFP process, businesses now had to detail how their company aligned with the objectives reflected in the two policy documents.



Kinsmen Sport Centre, Edmonton

On the lookout for a locally owned business with the capacity to provide healthy food options, the City invited Moo's Healthy Food Fast to submit a proposal for the opening at Kinsmen. Moo's local ownership and proven track record for serving up fresh, healthy food across various YMCAs and World Health fitness centres in Edmonton was what the City was looking for. Upon review of the proposal, the City awarded Moo's the contract to operate the food concession at Kinsmen.

The response was phenomenal, and especially to have the moms come up and say, 'I am so glad you're here... I want my kid to have something healthy.'

*Val Locke
Moo's Healthy Food Fast*

Strategies to Overcome Barriers: Knowing Your Audience and Stakeholder Support

With the intention of bringing healthy food to Kinsmen, Moo's featured a healthy menu that consisted of at least 85% healthy choices based on the ANGCY. At first, this goal may have seemed too lofty. Indeed, when Moo's initially arrived at Kinsmen, customer demand for unhealthy food was a key challenge to overcome. As Locke reflects, some customers

"just wanted their donuts and coffee," not healthy smoothies and wraps.

Overcoming this challenge meant that Moo's had to be strategic in promoting and marketing healthy products to generate customer demand. With this in mind, Locke had to find new and novel ways to achieve Moo's goals. Through meetings with City officials, Locke learned that in addition to being a recreation centre for families, the City had recently developed Kinsmen as an elite athletic training facility. With this information, Moo's geared their healthy menu to athletes, coaches, and trainers who frequented the facility. Locke asserts that the demand for healthy food turned around when the athletic demographic caught wind of a restaurant that serves healthy food to support and enhance their performance.



Moo's Healthy Food Fast Concession

While strategic marketing to athletes was key, Locke also gives credit to the support Moo's received from stakeholders, such as the City, industry partners, and University of Alberta researchers:

- City administration accommodated Moo's needs and provided high-level support. For example, upholding their commitment to local businesses and healthier food options, the City was there when Moo's needed to put up new signage and posters to sell their healthier products.
- Industry partners, such as local food suppliers, were supportive of Moo's healthy food vision. Locke recalls that food suppliers, such as Gordon Food Service, were willing to negotiate rates so that Moo's was able to provide healthy food at competitive prices.
- Moo's worked with researchers at the University of Alberta to implement evidence-based strategies, such as traffic light menu labelling, to promote healthier food choices. Traffic light labelling, a system that simplifies nutritional information into healthy (green) or unhealthy (red) choices, has shown promise in encouraging the selection of healthy options.

Reflecting back, well-rounded support from these stakeholders, along with a determined drive, has been integral to Moo's success.

The most important thing that lends to success and more success in the future is a knowledge base of what the coaches, the athletes, and trainers want.

Val Locke
Moo's Healthy Food Fast

Current Successes and Future Directions

Since overcoming initial challenges, Moo's has been successful in implementing a healthier menu at Kinsmen. According to Locke, Moo's presence in Kinsmen has been welcomed by regular patrons and members of the community. More recently, Moo's has worked with the City to pilot and subsequently establish a seasonal kiosk featuring healthy smoothies and snacks at the Queen Elizabeth Pool, located outside Kinsmen.

Ultimately, Moo's continued commitment to provide healthy options in recreation centres and their local ownership aligns with the City's objectives as outlined in the *Operational Vending Guidelines* and *Fresh*. Moving forward, the City is hopeful that the success of Moo's at Kinsmen will translate to other City facilities.

With this in mind, the City has awarded Moo's contracts for concession services in City indoor arenas, Mill Woods Recreation Centre, Londonderry Fitness and Leisure Centre, and Hawrelak Park. Throughout this process, Moo's recognizes the importance of building on ongoing partnerships with the City, industry partners, and researchers. According to Locke, nurturing partnerships and relationships with stakeholders will be important as the business expands.

You need to create awareness of the healthier things you're doing, because it's not just enough to put it on the menu.

*Val Locke
Moo's Healthy Food Fast*

In many ways, Moo's success encapsulates what policy in action looks like. Policies, such as the *Operational Vending Guidelines* and the *Fresh Strategy*, act as building blocks to the change process, which can help to inform and sustain action over time. Moo's story also demonstrates how a concession that provides healthier options can be profitable.



*Moo's Healthy Food Fast Kiosk
Queen Elizabeth Pool, Kinsmen Sport Centre*

Key Lessons



- ◆ **Policy as the foundation:** Guidelines, strategies, and policies help create a foundation for change. The *Operational Vending Guidelines* and *the Fresh Strategy* documents influenced the contract bidding process towards companies that align with the City's values and direction.
- ◆ **Identify champions:** Work with leaders in private industry who are committed, dedicated, and willing to stick to the process.
- ◆ **Supportive partnerships and open lines of communication:** Strong connections and support from the City, industry partners, and researchers were vital to running a healthier business model.
- ◆ **Learning what's working in the private sector.** Moo's years of experience in the private sector led to their success in the public sector.
- ◆ **Be creative.** Continuous marketing and education is integral to running a successful business. Openness to innovation and incorporating evidence-based strategies, such as traffic light labelling, helps generate demand for healthy food.

For More Information:

Valerie Locke
CEO and Founder
Moo's Healthy Food Fast
(780) 953-6433
valerielocke@mac.com

For more information on Edmonton's Recreation Centres, please visit: https://www.edmonton.ca/activities_parks_recreation/recreation-leisure-centres-pools.aspx.

For more information on Moo's Healthy Food Fast, please visit: <http://mooshealthyfoodfast.com/>.

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