

# Buying Clubs

COMOC has been distributing Maine organic products throughout New England since 1995, and is the first and only distributor providing local foods to buying clubs. In order to provide the best possible service to your buying club, please read [Our Vision](#) which will explain what we believe we can do for you.

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*[Download this "How to Start..." section as a printable pdf file.]*

## How to Start a Buying Club from Scratch

A Buying Club can be as simple or as comprehensive as the members wish to make it. At one end of the spectrum, a few friends, neighbors, co-workers or schoolmates can get together to buy and split up a few cases of food in a member's kitchen or garage. At the other end, thirty to a hundred members' orders from several supplier catalogs are totaled into case lots, orders placed, and a larger space like a Grange hall or church basement is used for dividing the food when it arrives. But regardless of size, each buying club goes through the same steps.

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### STEP 0. IN THE BEGINNING, DETERMINE THE BASICS.

**A. Who will be your group.** Your co-workers? Extended family and friends? Schoolmates? Anyone in your town? The people in the club should have some way of regularly communicating with one another, as this will be required for the smoother operation of the buying club. Starting small at first and growing over time may be the best way to proceed rather than trying to begin with a large group at the outset.

The ideal is for the minimum size of the group to be big enough to order full case lots of the most desired food items, since partial cases are apt to be unavailable or more expensive. A group of twenty to thirty households is large enough to make up most case lots but small enough to be manageable. By answering the questions in Step 0 your group will have a good idea of its best start-up size.

Sometimes a buying club forms one or more sub-groups who collate an order for 10-15 people and add that to the main buying club as a single order. At breakdown, each subgroup order is taken away to be further broken down into individual orders. Thus a buying club can handle one or two hundred families if the breakdown involves only ten to twenty subgroups.

**B. Decide what kind of food you want to buy.** Natural foods? Locally produced foods? Organic foods? The types of food you choose to offer will determine what suppliers you use, how the food must be handled, what savings are available, etc. After a while, more types of food can be added and more suppliers used. COMOC has no minimum order and encourages orders from buying clubs. Note, however, that some food suppliers may have large minimum orders or are reluctant to deal with buying clubs, considering them too bothersome and too costly to serve. Garden seeds, although they are a once a year order, are often a good choice for a buying club to consider ordering, since savings can be considerable. [Fedco Seeds](#) is specifically set up to deal with buying clubs.

**C. Why are you forming a buying club?** What is your group looking for: Better prices? More access to locally produced or organic foods? A chance to get together socially? Often there is a combination of these and other reasons, but talking about this in the beginning will help to unify the group.

**D. How frequently will the buying club operate?** Some city produce buying clubs order weekly, while some rural natural foods buying clubs order bi-monthly or quarterly. Obviously the more perishable the food type, the more frequently will be the ordering cycle. It's completely up to the people in the buying club how often they want to do an ordering cycle. Everything else aside, the better organized and the smoother the club can be made to run, and the more enjoyable the process is for everyone, the more frequently everyone will want to do an order. In any case there should be an agreed upon, well defined ordering schedule that everyone is aware of. Don't forget to figure on how all the holidays will affect your chosen schedule, either from supplier delivery schedules being altered or from members going away.

**E. How will expenses be covered?** Many buying clubs add a small percentage fee to each order, or assess each member a fixed fee per order. This is to cover the cost of paper and plastic bags, pens and markers, perhaps postage and phone calls, and any spillage or spoilage, so that these costs won't have to come out of any one person's pocket.

**F. Who will do the work?** Collating the orders, contacting the suppliers, writing the checks, meeting the delivery truck, dividing the food, keeping the books, cleaning up. Some jobs, like dividing the food, are often done by the group coming together to do the "breakdown" of the buying club's order into individual orders. Other jobs are most easily done by a single person, but these jobs can be rotated among the members, or the jobs divided in some equitable way so that everyone understands that all members are "pulling their own weight". Dividing the work in a manner that is perceived by everyone to be equitable is of great importance to the longevity of the buying club; this cannot be overemphasized. Equitable doesn't mean "equal", it means "fair". It reflects that all agree that everyone is helping out in some significant way.

**G. The Jobs.** As you can see from the above, the work of making each buying club ordering cycle happen involves a group of tasks. Some of those tasks, like those involved in compiling the master order list, naturally belong together and can be grouped as defined "jobs". Each job is best handled by one person or a small, effective committee who often will do that job every order cycle for a year or two, and then help train their replacements. Other tasks, such as cleanup or dividing blocks of cheese, are simple once-per-order-cycle tasks and stand alone. These can be done by any member who wishes to specialize in them. Here are some examples grouping tasks into jobs:

- **Treasurer.** This person handles the incoming money from members, deposits it, writes the check(s) to the supplier(s), handles any refunds due to members, balances the checkbook, and reports on the finances of the club.
- **Masterlist Maker.** Each order cycle this person makes a collated list of each member's order and totals it to see how much the club needs to buy. Partial cases can be rounded up or down and individual orders adjusted accordingly, or perhaps a surplus table can be set up at the breakdown site for selling leftover partial cases. The total order gets called in to the supplier(s) and arrangement is made for delivery place and time. At the breakdown, the Masterlist Maker keeps an overview of everyone's order.
- **Coordinator.** This is a person to preside over meetings and the breakdown, as they are watching the overall process and not trying to keep track of numbers. This is also a person who can step in as backup for any other job holder who is absent. The Coordinator can also act as overall communicator within the group to make sure everyone knows what is happening and what they are supposed to do when. New members are often sent to the Coordinator for an introduction to the buying club, its expectations and procedures. The Coordinator is also the one in charge of "loose ends".

These are some ways to combine tasks into jobs. Your group will need to consider the experience, skills and reliability of members who are willing to volunteer their time and energy to make the buying club succeed. That positive spirit and willingness to work together are two of the most critical factors in the success of a cooperative enterprise.

**Once you have these basics covered, the following steps are repeated each ordering cycle.**



## STEP 1. ORDERING.

In its simplest form, members sit around a living room with a supplier's price list and everyone indicates how much they want of each item on the list. One member is in charge of the club's Master List, and makes sure that the total of each item comes out to a number of full cases that the buying club will order. (Orders that do not make up a full case are canceled if no way of dealing with the extra has been devised.) Each member totals up the cost of his or her order and leaves payment with the order.

Sometimes copies of the supplier's list, or portions of it, are mailed or emailed to members, and each member is responsible for getting an order and payment back to the Master List Maker by an order deadline. This method avoids everyone having to come to an ordering meeting, but requires someone to make up the ordering sheets and do the mailing. Inevitably, some partial cases will be ordered this way. If the group has a way of dealing with (and paying for) "surplus" when orders are rounded up to whole cases, then this isn't really a problem.

Ordering sheets have columns for the item, price, ordered amount, extended [price x ordered amount], received amount, and refund due.

There are also possibilities of automating the entire ordering and collating process electronically, such as with the free website [www.foodclub.org](http://www.foodclub.org) which was set up especially to aid buying clubs in their order collating and bookkeeping.

Another possibility for compiling orders of shared cases is to upload a spreadsheet to Google Documents (or use all or part of COMOC's ordering spreadsheet there). This free, online service allows multiple users to input into a shared document. If the spreadsheet is set up with tabulating formulas, this can automatically create an accurate, up to date order sheet. This can be used just to divide up shared cases, or to compile a master list of everyone's order.



## STEP 2. THE MASTER LIST

A master list is a collated list of everyone's orders. This can be done by hand on a large sheet of paper, or on a computer spreadsheet. It is used not only to total the items from everyone's order, but to divide the food into member orders once the food arrives. At delivery, if the amount received is short of what was ordered by members, then this can be noted on the master list and everyone's orders pro-rated. COMOC offers to [registered buying clubs](#) a ready made spreadsheet of our entire item list and a Buying Clubs Formulas Spreadsheet which automates order collating. To learn more about these and how to download them, go to: <http://crownofmainecoop.com/spreadsheets.shtml>.



## STEP 3. PLACING THE ORDER WITH THE SUPPLIER(S).

Once the order totals are obtained, the orders must be placed with each supplier, and as specific a delivery time as possible ascertained. Determine at this time if the expected prices from the price sheet will be the delivered prices; each supplier may differ. Any items that are predicted to be short or out of stock at ordering time can be adjusted on the master list. Using multiple suppliers means being able to handle multiple delivery times.



## STEP 4. MEETING THE TRUCK.

Many suppliers will want cash on delivery, at least for the first few ordering cycles, and sometimes as a general rule. This means that the person(s) meeting the truck will have to have payment in hand. This job may also require some patience, since delivery trucks can be delayed by many factors: bad roads, poor directions, complications at previous deliveries, breakdowns. When a delivery is made to a residence, this may be less of a problem but the larger regional suppliers may refuse to deliver to private homes.

Deciding on a delivery location should take several things into consideration. First, think about your food order. Does it need to be kept dry? cool? frozen? prevented from freezing? protected from rodents or pets? A delivery location should not require climbing stairs; garages are often ideal. Knowing the size of the delivery vehicle will enable you to avoid hazards such as overhead wires, low tree branches or too-narrow driveways.

Checking off delivered items against the invoice at the time of delivery is always a good practice, and can save headaches later on. Any items that are actually out of stock or short should be noted, and the master list adjusted accordingly before the food is divided. It is also good practice to compare the invoice to the master list and make any necessary adjustments to individual totals before group pick-up time. Recruit enough help and leave time between delivery and pick-up to do these important tasks as well as to break down the orders, if your members expect a quick pick-up or your site will not accommodate many people at one time.



## STEP 5. THE BREAKDOWN.

Preparation of the breakdown site should be given some thought. It should be well lit, warm enough to work in but not too hot, and supplied with plastic bags, scoops, knives, markers and scales (if needed). It should have some clean table space for dividing messy items.

For many members this is the most fun part of the whole operation. Anyone walking in on the middle of a breakdown is usually bewildered by the seemingly chaotic activity—yet there is method in all the madness. Some groups find breakdowns work best when most—if not all—of the members take part. Others find that a smaller number works better, perhaps five people who are well oriented to the process. Often, one person may be in charge of each item or group of items, dividing any shortage, spoilage or overage equitably among the members. It also makes sense with regard to health concerns: for example, the person dividing the unwashed potatoes isn't also cutting the cheese. Some groups find that it works best to have a rule that no member may take his or her order until all the food has been divided and checked against the master list. This assures that all food has been correctly divided.

Each member has a group of boxes or bags with the member's name and the original order sheet. Items are checked off by the person who filled that particular order. As each member leaves, he or she gets a refund for items not received, or a charge for any extra items beyond the original order.

Some buying clubs operating on a short ordering cycle distribute the next ordering cycle's order sheets at the breakdown.

Cleanup of the breakdown site afterwards is another important way members can participate in making the ordering cycle—and the buying club—a success.



## SOME HELPFUL ONLINE TOOLS FOR BUYING CLUBS

**Yahoo! Groups:** This free, online service allows members to reach all other group members easily via email. It also offers a place to save documents, links, and message archives that all members can access. The group can also be set up to send automatic reminders for meetings and order deadlines.

**Google Documents:** This free service is great for compiling orders. All members can be invited to view and make changes to a document or spreadsheet simultaneously, and all changes are traceable back to an individual's login. The spreadsheet can also automatically tally orders as they are created with a few simple formulas.

**COMOC has created a Buying Club Formulas Spreadsheet** for collating orders which is available for download from this website. The "Buying Club Formulas Spreadsheet" has no items listed, allowing you to fill in your own product info into the first five columns. It has numerous formulas entered to allow immediate reporting of unit pricing, member payments due, order totaling and more. There is also a "COMOC Order" spreadsheet which is simply the entire COMOC Availability List info pre-entered into the first five columns. You can use it to paste the items you want into the Buying Club Formulas spreadsheet, or into any spreadsheet of your liking. Both are downloadable in most common spreadsheet formats. Learn more about these and how to download them from the Spreadsheets Page, <http://crownofmainecoop.com/spreadsheets.shtml>

**The foodclub.org website** <http://www.foodclub.org> offers a free collating and bookkeeping service created by a programmer in a California buying club.