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EARTH’S GENERAL STORE: BALANCING PEOPLE, PLANET, and PROFIT IN ORGANIC-food RETAILING

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It was late February 2016, and the snow was melting outside Michael Kalmanovitch’s store on 104 Street in downtown Edmonton. Around the world, 2015 had been the warmest year on record, and the unusually mild Edmonton weather at the beginning of 2016 brought more attention to the environmental issue of global warming.[[1]](#endnote-1) As Kalmanovitch looked outside his store window at the brown grass that was emerging from a pool of melted snow, he pondered what the future held for organic-food retailers like himself in Edmonton.

Kalmanovitch was fiercely passionate about environmental and social sustainability, a sentiment that had inspired him to start Earth’s General Store more than 20 years ago. Kalmanovitch had never considered himself a businessperson, rather “a citizen [who] does business.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Highly visible in Edmonton’s “green” community, Kalmanovitch was the driving force behind numerous Earth Day, bicycle commuter, and sustainable food events around the city, which all encouraged citizens to “consume wisely, consume locally, and consume fairly.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Although Kalmanovitch was proud of what he had built—two stores offering organic groceries and fair-trade goods in Edmonton—he worried about the financial sustainability of his downtown location. Since its opening in 2014, the downtown store on 104 Street had constantly struggled to remain profitable in the face of its extremely high overhead cost. The original Whyte Avenue location of Earth’s General Store, popular amongst its loyal patrons, was subsidizing the downtown store just to keep its doors open, but that practice certainly was not a long-term solution.

Simply put, the downtown location was a severe financial drain, and without some immediate changes to the situation, Kalmanovitch risked losing the Whyte Avenue store.[[4]](#endnote-4) But Kalmanovitch did not want to close any of his stores. He felt that Earth’s General Store not only gave him a constructive way to promote his concerns about environmental issues but was also an important public activism platform that inspired Edmontonians to get involved in their local community. Pouring himself a cup of organic, fair-trade coffee, Kalmanovitch sat down with the most recent financial statements (see Exhibit 1) for Earth’s General Store. He knew he had to come up with a plan.

EARTH’S GENERAL STORE

**Start-Up Phase**

With an investment of $17,000,[[5]](#endnote-5) Kalmanovitch had opened Earth’s General Store on September 3, 1991, in Edmonton’s historic Old Strathcona neighbourhood. Founded on its mission “to offer people information and products that [would] help them reduce their ecological and social impact on the planet and all inhabitants,” the unique store at 109 Street and Whyte Avenue carried environmental consumer products such as recycled paper, cloth diapers, organic clothing, books, magazines, cleaners, personal care items, seeds, and composters, to name just a few. In fact, Earth’s General Store was the first retailer in Canada to sell hemp products such as hemp twine.

Since Earth’s General Store promoted a distinct focus on customer engagement, Kalmanovitch encouraged his employees to initiate genuine conversations with the patrons when they came in to shop. In Kalmanovitch’s eyes, providing information and eco-friendly product options could have a positive impact on consumer behaviour towards what he believed was the ultimate goal in life—“Do as little harm as possible and leave the world better than when we arrived.”[[6]](#endnote-6) As well, the staff members at Earth’s General Store were forbidden from using the word “cheap.” In Kalmanovitch’s mind, cheap meant low quality, not low price. He wanted to focus consumers’ attention not on price but on the quality and origin of his products.

Financing Growth

The global financial crisis in 2008 affected businesses around the world, and Earth’s General Store was no exception. Sales had dropped off, but Kalmanovitch was determined to move in the direction of using Earth’s General Store to deliver quality organic food to Edmontonians because, as Kalmanovitch said, “Food is the number one way we [have an impact on] the planet.”

Knowing he could not borrow all the money he needed from typical financial institutions, Kalmanovitch reached out to those he knew best: his customers. After all, his customers were loyal, and they had a vested interest in the success of his stores.

In 2009, long before the days of social platforms like Kickstarter and GoFundMe, Kalmanovitch garnered international media attention by creating an innovative funding model to obtain the financing he needed to expand Earth’s General Store’s offerings into grocery. The model was based on borrowing money from the store’s customers in exchange for purchase discounts—a strategy that represented one of the earliest crowd-funding models.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Kalmanovitch’s model worked like this: When a customer loaned the store $1,000, for example, Earth’s General Store would give that person a 5 per cent discount as an appreciation gift—an interest of sorts. The customer’s loan was then worth $1,050 in in-store credit. As the customer purchased items from the store, they would receive repayment at 15 per cent of their grocery receipt, which would be deducted from the bill and applied to the descending loan balance. In short, customers were pre-paying for 15 per cent of their future grocery purchases, and Earth’s General Store was able to spread its loan repayment over a long period of time.

Kalmanovitch’s innovative financing program raised $75,000 from Earth’s General Store’s customers. Combining this with $50,000 of his own money, Kalmanovitch was then able to expand his offering at Earth’s General Store to include organic food products that would reduce Edmontonians’ impact on the planet and society.[[8]](#endnote-8)

**Moving to a Larger Location**

By 2010, Earth’s General Store had raised enough money through customer crowd-funding to move the original store to a bigger location on Whyte Avenue and 96 Street. At this point, Kalmanovitch decided to start offering organic food, dropping many of the items the store had originally sold for almost 20 years. Staying true to its sustainability values, Earth’s General Store recruited 75 volunteers who used bicycles to haul merchandise and fixtures to the new store, 13 blocks away from the original location.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Kalmanovitch had been considering the possibility of opening a second Earth’s General Store location for quite some time. He had originally intended to open it in Edmonton’s northeast sector, but a University of Alberta research report on “food deserts” caught his eye, and this ground-breaking report identified downtown Edmonton as a location that was severely lacking in supermarket accessibility.

**Adding a Downtown Store**

In summer 2014, Kalmanovitch opened a second location of Earth’s General Store in Edmonton’s up-and-coming 104 Street neighbourhood, just down the street from a national grocery chain store, Sobeys, which anchored the trendy street.[[10]](#endnote-10) Kalmanovitch planned to operate his downtown store, which occupied the vacant space left by the short-lived Pangaea Organic Market, as a niche option, and to supplement a 10–30 per cent portion of downtown consumers’ regular chain-store grocery purchases by offering gluten-free, vegan, or vegetarian items. As well, the new location would include a deli that offered raw and vegan options to attract the grab-and-go downtown lunchtime crowd.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Just days after Kalmanovitch signed the paperwork for his new downtown store, Sobeys unexpectedly departed from its keystone location on 104 Street after finalizing its plans to acquire another national grocery chain, Safeway Canada.[[12]](#endnote-12) This change in the downtown retail landscape put a sudden end to Kalmanovitch’s plan to top up Sobeys customers’ food purchases with an item or two from his own store. The presence of a Sobeys store in downtown Edmonton was once viewed as a sign of downtown revitalization, and this unexpected departure was quite worrisome to Kalmanovitch and other 104 Street retailers.

The downtown location of Earth’s General Store struggled to survive on a street occupied mostly by bars and restaurants. Unfortunately, the store did not have a following like that of the original Whyte Avenue location. Opening a specialty food store on a popular street in a neighbourhood full of new high-rise apartments and condominiums had seemed like such a sure option, especially after the departure of the only nearby grocery store, Sobeys.[[13]](#endnote-13) Despite the slow start, Kalmanovitch still held hope that his new location would eventually gain momentum. Unfortunately, that was not the case. The significant number of young urbanites who lived in the downtown core did not embrace Earth’s General Store’s offering, a factor that hurt the retailer financially.

**Market Research: An Online Survey**

Kalmanovitch aimed to keep the downtown store on 104 Street open despite the effect it was having on his bank account, which contrasted with the success of his other store on Whyte Avenue. In the fall of 2014, he decided to reach out for help with some market research. With assistance from a group of business students at MacEwan University, Kalmanovitch created an online survey to poll Edmonton’s downtown dwellers about their product preferences so Kalmanovitch could tailor his store’s offering to match the needs of the downtown residents. The survey received 1,400 responses.[[14]](#endnote-14) While trying to come up with solutions to meet the challenges of his downtown location, Kalmanovitch still had to juggle the needs of his customers and staff at the Whyte Avenue location too.

In 2015–2016, with the downtown location still in jeopardy, Kalmanovitch started to brainstorm some creative options to attract new customers. From food truck pop-ups, community fundraisers, and documentary screening events to direct-mail marketing, special discounts, and sales days, Earth’s General Store employed a variety of marketing tactics with the goal of increasing consumer awareness. Unfortunately, these efforts were still not enough to get the downtown store out of its financial slump.

**Adding Delivery Service**

In 2016, Kalmanovitch launched a new grocery delivery service. Initially targeting downtown businesses that provided fresh fruit and snacks for their office staff and customers, Kalmanovitch planned to expand the service to homes and condominiums. The new service delivered boxes of organic food from Earth’s General Store via a new cargo bicycle and was priced competitively against other Edmonton box-delivery services like The Organic Box and SPUD. In addition to organic produce and other snacks from his store, Kalmanovitch offered delivery of fair-trade-certified organic coffee and tea for office lunchrooms. [[15]](#endnote-15)

ORGANIC FOOD INDUSTRY

On a worldwide scale, the value of the organic food market was estimated at US$72 billion as of 2013, with the United States holding the lead in retail sales. Of the world’s land, 43.1 million hectares was reported as organic farmland, and there were two million organic producers worldwide.[[16]](#endnote-16) The global organic food market was expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of over 16 per cent from 2015 to 2020.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Consumer demand in the United States for organic products had grown by double digits every year since the 1990s, from US$3.6 billion in 1997 to over US$39 billion in 2014, with 84 per cent of Americans stating that they purchased organic food.[[18]](#endnote-18) Canada had seen a similar trend of increasing growth in the organic food market, with a valuation of approximately US$2.6 billion as of 2013—triple the value reported in 2006. This value positioned Canada as one of the top five largest organic food markets in the world.[[19]](#endnote-19)

The Canada Organic Trade Association reported that Canada was home to approximately 5,000 organic farms, handlers, and manufactures. The number of organic farms in Canada had increased by 71 per cent from 2001 to 2011, while the overall total number of farms had decreased by 17 per cent, further demonstrating a shift in the overall market.[[20]](#endnote-20) Organic products made up an estimated 1.7 per cent of national grocery sales in 2013 in a variety of food and beverage categories.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Organic Consumer Profile

Growth in the organic market was attributable to heightened awareness of healthy foods and lifestyles, increased income levels, higher standards of living, concern for the environment, and support through government programs and initiatives. At a systems level, this shift could also be linked to support for local farmers, sustainable food production, and decreasing overall environmental impact.[[22]](#endnote-22) Despite this growing awareness, organic food consumers faced deterrents such as price, availability, product appearance, and lack of knowledge surrounding organic production.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Canadians typically purchased organic food products through supermarkets (31 per cent), organic food stores (28 per cent), and local markets (27 per cent).[[24]](#endnote-24) Furthermore, 63 per cent of Canadians who bought organic lived in Canada’s largest cities, 62 per cent had families with children under the age of two, 62 per cent were between the ages of 35 and 44, and 61 per cent were university educated.[[25]](#endnote-25)

CANADA’S GROCERY RETAIL INDUSTRY

Grocery retail was an $81.6 billion industry in Canada, with Loblaws and Sobeys dominating nearly 60 per cent of the market. The industry peaked in 2009, when revenues reached $84.4 billion before declining due to the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis on consumer disposable income. From 2016 to 2021, the grocery retail industry was expected to grow by 1 per cent per year.[[26]](#endnote-26) After major American retailers Costco and Walmart expanded into the grocery business, the industry became more competitive than ever, with many retailers forced to engage in price-based competition. Despite the increased competition, grocery retailers were expected to benefit from the rise in health-conscious consumers seeking to purchase organic, all-natural, and value-added products. In order to maintain profitably, many of the leading grocery retailers were expected to expand their organic private-label offerings.

EDMONTON: A FOOD DESERT

A study released by the University of Alberta’s School of Retailing examined current and proposed grocery store locations in seven Canadian urban centres, including Edmonton. The study mapped out potentially underserved areas, also known as food deserts, where consumers lacked access to affordable, nutritious food. Food deserts particularly arose within populated, low-income areas that had limited access to full-service supermarkets. Typically, 1.5 square metres of grocery retail space per capita was desirable, with less than 0.9 square metres per capita considered to be a food desert.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Craig Patterson, head of applied research at the University of Alberta’s School of Retailing, summed up an important finding of the university’s study: “One thing that we found in general is to make an urban area truly walkable and truly urban, grocery stores are often ideally within 500 metres of a person’s residence.”[[28]](#endnote-28) The study supported what other research had already confirmed: Edmonton’s downtown was a food desert, with most grocers located outside the ideal 500-metre distance from consumer residences. The study demonstrated that Edmonton required at least four more grocery stores that were larger than 3,000 square metres. The survey identified gaps in Edmonton’s urban core grocery coverage at Jasper Avenue and 118 Street, Jasper Avenue and 114 Street, 102 Avenue and 96 Street, and Rossdale (see Exhibit 2).

The Competition

In 2016, organic food products were found in nearly every major grocery store in Edmonton. In what used to be a niche business, Earth’s General Store had to compete with both specialty organic and major grocery retailers. Edmonton still relied heavily on automobiles for transport, and with the ease and convenience of their own vehicles, consumers were willing to drive to larger store hubs to do the majority of their shopping, thus widening the geographic reach of Earth’s General Store’s competition.

Within the Edmonton downtown and university core, three organic-only grocers competed directly with Earth’s General Store: two stores from Planet Organic Market, a large organic chain grocer; Wild Earth Foods, a locally owned and operated family grocer; and Blush Lane Organic Market, a family-owned natural foods store.

In the same district, many major Canadian grocery retailers (Safeway, Save-On-Foods, Sobeys, and No Frills) offered a limited selection of organic products, generally at lower prices than those offered by Earth’s General Store (see Exhibit 3). Whole Foods, a popular organic-food retailer from the United States, announced that its first Alberta store would open in the summer of 2016 in a 12,800-square-metre location in southwest Edmonton, just a 10- to 15-minute drive from downtown. As one of the largest health and organic grocers in the United States, Whole Foods wielded both brand and buyer power and thereby posed a significant threat to Edmonton’s small organic grocers. Furthermore, a new Loblaws City Market measuring 12,227 square metres was proposed for Edmonton’s Brewery District in the northwest corner of downtown, with another unconfirmed grocery store proposed within the new Edmonton Ice District. Although it was possible that a grocery store would replace the former 5,760-square-metre Sobeys location on the corner of 104 Street, a Shoppers Drug Mart had already opened across the street containing a grocery department that measured approximately 914 square metres.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Two well-established home and office organic food delivery services—SPUD and The Organic Box—competed against Earth’s General Store’s new concept of bicycle-delivered organic groceries. As well, Edmonton was home to more than 10 unique farmers’ markets that offered locally grown food, including organic options. In fact, Edmonton’s City Market Downtown, located near Earth’s General Store on 104 Street, was voted as the best farmers’ market in the world by a National Geographic travel blogger in 2013.[[30]](#endnote-30)

DOWNTOWN EDMONTON REVITALIZATION

Edmonton was a mid-sized city located in Alberta, Canada, home to 895,000 inhabitants or to 1,278,000 inhabitants when including the surrounding areas.[[31]](#endnote-31) As the second fastest growing city in Canada, its metropolitan area population grew 3.3 per cent from July 2013 to July 2014. Known as the Gateway to the North, Edmonton attracted many workers from across the country and around the world who worked in the oil and gas sectors in Northern Alberta.[[32]](#endnote-32) Statistics Canada reported an average median total income (all family types) in Edmonton of $98,480, with an employment rate of 69 per cent.[[33]](#endnote-33) Key investments in infrastructure, services, and communities were critical in maintaining and stabilizing the population.

**Population Profile**

In terms of its population concentration, Edmonton was known as a low-density city. Cars were the primary mode of transportation for the majority of Edmonton residents, with only 10 per cent of people taking public transit to work, despite the presence of a transit system that incorporated both a bus system and a light rail network.[[34]](#endnote-34) Edmonton suffered from being one of the least walkable and least transit-friendly big cities in Canada.[[35]](#endnote-35)

From 2001 to 2012, the population in downtown Edmonton nearly doubled, expanding from 6,175 to 12,199, and it was anticipated to grow to 19,000 by 2024. Edmonton’s growing population in the downtown core was younger than the city’s average, with 38.5 per cent reported to be between 20 and 35 years old.[[36]](#endnote-36) This growth trend was anticipated to accelerate due to the consolidation of the MacEwan University and NorQuest College campuses in the downtown area. Furthermore, the population growth was also increasing the number of professionals (e.g., engineers and accountants) who worked in offices that were located in the downtown core. This shift in downtown land use from goods to services attracted developers, restaurants, and other business owners into Edmonton’s downtown core.

**Attracting Residents to the Downtown Core**

Despite past projects that had encouraged a lively downtown core, such as the $3.1 million investment on the 104 Street Promenade, Edmonton had long struggled to draw residents to its downtown core.[[37]](#endnote-37) Part of this issue was attributable to the dilemma that, in order to attract residents, downtown neighbourhoods required basic amenities such as grocery stores, restaurants, coffee shops, services, and parks, but business owners were reluctant to open brick-and-mortar locations in areas that did not already contain a significant number of residents.

Beginning in 1997, the City of Edmonton began to attract businesses and residents to downtown by offering incentives such as rebates and other tax incentives for developers; it also created wider sidewalks and more benches for the purpose of bringing pedestrians to the streets, as with the 104 Street project. Furthermore, the Edmonton-based Katz Group of Companies’ $2.5 billion mixed-use sports and entertainment district, dubbed the “Ice District,” was being developed on 10 hectares in Edmonton’s downtown core. When completed, the Ice District would become Canada’s largest mixed-use and entertainment district, a scenario that created excitement and anticipation for the further revitalization of Edmonton’s downtown.[[38]](#endnote-38) Ian O’Donnell, development committee chairman of the Downtown Edmonton Community League, commented, “[The Ice District is] carving out its own personality. It’s not trying to be Whyte Avenue. It’s a bit different in a lot of ways. [We’re] starting to see downtown becoming the place to go for professionals and for a younger generation.”[[39]](#endnote-39)

GOING FORWARD

Reflecting on the future of Earth’s General Store, Kalmanovitch was perplexed about what to do next. The business had come a long way since its inception, and the promise of a lively downtown core was certainly appealing. Still, despite data showing that his downtown location was well positioned to capitalize on the city’s future revitalization efforts, Kalmanovitch’s business continued to struggle. He had always envisioned operating several small stores throughout Edmonton’s food desert areas, which would allow him to advocate for environmental and social sustainability by offering products that lessened citizens’ impact on the planet and its inhabitants. However, with the current state of the downtown store’s finances, Kalmanovitch’s vision and the future of the original Whyte Avenue store were both in jeopardy.

As Kalmanovitch remained deep in thought about the fate of Earth’s General Store, his coffee went cold. He needed to develop a strategy for moving forward, but what should he do?

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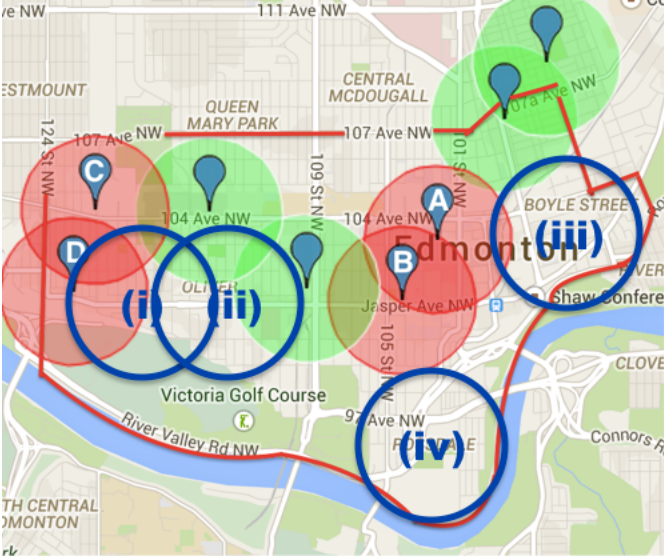
EXHIBIT 1: EARTH’S GENERAL STORE INCOME STATEMENT (in CA$)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Income Statement** | **2015** | **2014** |
| Sales | 3,748,805 | 2,505,948 |
| Cost of Goods Sold | 2,640,070 | 1,879,488 |
| Gross Profit | 1,108,735 | 626,460 |
|  |  |  |
| Expenses |  |  |
| Amortization | 46,348 | 19,773 |
| Automotive | 2,390 | 1,664 |
| Business Taxes | 2,678 | 3,130 |
| Equipment Rental | 1,546 | 341 |
| Freight | 436 | 728 |
| Insurance | 3,963 | 1,639 |
| Interest/Bank Fees | 38,390 | 25,487 |
| Interest on Long-Term Debt | 11,664 |  |
| Marketing | 24,355 | 13,725 |
| Office Supplies | 45,320 | 23,776 |
| Professional Fees | 17,579 | 17,302 |
| Rent | 248,854 | 92,911 |
| Repairs and Maintenance | 27,196 | 3,317 |
| Salaries/Benefits | 787,872 | 430,054 |
| Training | 125 | 5,877 |
| Travel | 920 | 2,187 |
| Utilities | 36,395 | 21,139 |
| Total Expenses | 1,296,031 | 663,050 |
|  |  |  |
| Net Income (Loss) Before Tax | −187,296 | −36,590 |
| Income Tax (Recovered) | −28,352 | −5,359 |
| Net Loss | −215,648 | −41,949 |

Source: Created by authors with information from company documents.

EXHIBIT 2: EDMONTON DOWNTOWN GROCERY STORES and FOOD DESERTS

Existing and Proposed Grocery Stores in Downtown Edmonton

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Note: Points labelled A to D show proposed grocery stores; unlabelled points show existing grocery stores; areas labelled (i)–(iv) show food deserts.

Source: *Grocery Stores in Canadian Urban Centres* (Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta School of Retailing, 2015), accessed May 1, 2017, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/529fc0c0e4b088b079c3fb6d/t/564bb92ee4b06f49e660b3ae/

1447803351239/Grocery+Stores+in+Canadian+Urban+Centres-P.pdf.

EXHIBIT 3: PRICE COMPARISONS—EARTH’S GENERAL STORE VersuS SAFEWAY (price per pound; lower prices in bold font) (in CA$)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Item** | **EGS** | **Safeway** |
| Bananas, Fair Trade | 1.29 | **0.77** |
| Cabbage, Green | 1.89 | **1.29** |
| Cabbage, Red | 1.99 | **1.49** |
| Ginger, Fair Trade | 4.99 | 4.99 |
| Oranges/Citrus, Navel | 2.49 | **1.99** |
| Squash, Summer Zucchini | **1.99** | 2.99 |
| Avocado, Fair Trade (Hass) | 1.99 | **1.79** |
| Cilantro, Bunch | 2.09 | **1.49** |
| Kale, Green Curly | 2.49 | 2.49 |
| Lemons, Fancy | **0.89** | 1.29 |
| Lettuce, Romaine | 2.79 | **1.29** |
| Parsley, Curly | 1.69 | 1.69 |
| **TOTAL** | **26.58** | **23.56** |

Note: 1 pound is equivalent to 0.45 kilograms.

Source: “Food Prices,” Earth’s General Store, February 2016, accessed March 27, 2016, http://earthsgeneralstore.ca/food-prices/.

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