



Getting your Thin Mint fix

No Girl Scout booths, sign ups at work, mostly. So how about delivered to your door?

By JENNIE ORVINO
For the North Bay Business Journal

Cookie monsters will need to search a little harder this year for their favorite box of Girl Scout Thin Mints.

With pandemic restrictions in place, teams of uniformed scouts rocking their award sashes won't be stationed outside your local grocery store, nor will their parents be soliciting orders from colleagues in the break rooms at their workplaces.

Girl Scout officials say they are pivoting, as other businesses are, to online sales. Buyers can go to gsnorcal.org, click or tap the Cookie tab, and put in a zip code at "Find a Cookie Entrepreneur." The URL of the website of a nearby girl scout will pop up. Customers can choose to have the order shipped, or (if the family has opted for it) to get "contactless" delivery. Delivery service Grubhub is even an option, Sundays only.

"Each girl is creating her own business in the space of the digital cookie link," says Heather Burlew-Hayden, chief marketing and membership officer of Girl Scouts of Northern California, one of 112 girl scout councils in the United States. It serves 19 counties extending from just south of San Francisco to the Oregon border.

"Every cookie entrepreneur makes decisions on how she wants to promote her business and then she executes against those decisions," explains Burlew-Hayden. "She can record a video; she can describe herself and what she hopes to use the proceeds for. She can also pull down images of cookies and post on her social media channels, and work with adults to have them promote her cookies through their social media to amplify her message. She can also use real life tools such as door hangers, leave-behinds in mailboxes, flyers on windshields, and other tools like this.



Area scout leaders say last year's sales just started when the pandemic began to shut things down. This year, the organization has had to adapt with continuing restrictions.

LAURA MOLINA

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The girls are getting very innovative in reaching out to members of their community, friends and family.”

The digital platform option has been available to scouts for six years.

But previous to COVID-19, it was not as popular. Scouts preferred to hang out with their friends while earning sales from the shoppers coming out of stores who couldn't resist succumbing to an impulse cookie buy.

“You tend to sell more cookies at a booth and in normal times I would focus on in-person selling, but during COVID we can't do that,” says Lena Friesen, an 11-year-old Cadette. “Instead, I've sent emails to past customers. I ordered a bunch of cards printed with my website and stapled on rubber bands to use them as door hangers.”

Lena delivered 500 postcards by walking almost six miles around her neighborhood. “I'm getting a lot of exercise, and I discovered this really cool street with some big houses that I had never seen before.” Last year she sold 2,008 boxes of cookies; her goal this year is 2,500.

Lena's mother, Jen Friesen, is a sixth grade teacher at Petaluma's Grant Elementary, and also a Girl Scout volunteer and troop leader. Friesen says her daughter had the unique idea of emailing restaurants to see if they'd like to order cookies as a special dessert to offer to patrons. Nobody has yet responded to that inquiry. Still, Lena had sold 370 boxes through her website in the first week of the cookie campaign, more than she sold online all last year.

None of the GSNorCal counties are currently allowing booths. According to California state rule, the council has decided that if a county is in yellow or orange they are allowed to do in-person booths by household; if the county is in red or purple, no booths are allowed.

COVID-19 IMPACT

In mid-March of 2020, the Girl Scouts of Northern California cookie sale was about two weeks from the finish line when the shelter-at-home order came. As it turned out, their sales total of 4.5 million boxes exceeded the 4.4 million sold in 2019.

“When the pandemic hit, our community came together in a big way and provided a ton of support, purchasing cookies for first responders, cookies for essential workers, making huge donations to nursing homes, hospitals, urgent care facilities, firefighters, you name it,” Burlew-Hayden says. “People bought up cookies left and right and made big cash gifts to get them distributed to the community. That's how we outperformed the previous year.”



Lena Friesen demonstrates the contactless delivery method that some area scouts are employing.

As for the impact of COVID on the cookie program in 2021, she is emphatic.

“We are about community health at Girl Scouts. Our values are around doing everything we can to get children back to school as soon as possible. It is critical to troops, the mental health of girls, the socio-emotional learning of girls. The women who run 95% of our troops are the primary household members who are making sure that the children are getting home schooled, distance learning and all that goes with it. So, the pressure on them is real. We are contributing in the best way we know how — which is to not promote the spread, to flatten the curve and be good citizens.”

Burlew-Hayden continues, “Although it is hard to make this shift, it is critical for the businesses in our state, for the health of all our people. We intend to be as safe as possible, because we want the pandemic to end for our community's sake as well as for the members of girl scouts. We know this is the right thing to do.”

COOKIE DISTRIBUTION

Online ordering will greatly expand the available market, leaders say. And to receive the order, the customers can have it shipped, or, if the Scout family agrees to do so, have a contactless delivery. (The scout arrives, drops the cookies, rings the doorbell and then waves from the sidewalk as the customer comes out to collect their boxes.)

The third distribution option is new this year. Cookies can be ordered through Grubhub from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Sundays only. Grubhub is not charging Girl Scouts their distributor's

fee, but the customer — who must first download the app — does pay Grubhub for delivery.

The final option online for a cookie buyer is to donate (in this case, there is no shipping charge). The people who receive these cookies know that a donation was made to Girl Scouts on their behalf. Some of the boxes get wrapped with a special “Care to Share” flyer, especially the cookies sent to first responders, men and women serving in our armed forces or given to food banks.

A SILVER LINING?

In spite of being difficult and vexing, the changes wrought by the pandemic (including no more standing for hours outside grocery stores), do have some advantages. “It's definitely great to sleep in,” admits Lena Friesen. “And also, you learn to be grateful for things you've taken for granted your whole life. All of a sudden you don't have them, and you think, whoa, I relied on them so much, and I'm going crazy without them and I didn't realize they were so important.”

Burlew-Hayden replies to the silver lining question by affirming that the pandemic has been a forcing factor in growing an area of the business that Girl Scout leadership has wanted to develop for a long time. The move to digital has helped expand marketing reach and has strengthened the girls' entrepreneurial and resilience muscles in a safe, contained space that is both fun and life-changing.

“People are very eager to support the girl who is on the other side of the cookie selling transaction.”

GS NORCAL BY THE NUMBERS

4.5M

packages of Girl Scout cookies were sold last year. Some of the proceeds go to support a troop's travel adventures (like a trip to Savannah, Georgia, the birthplace of founder Juliette Gordon Lowe) or to help with service projects in their communities (like taking care of a local creek or sponsoring a pet adoption day).

A portion of the proceeds this year will go toward restoring a summer camp, Skylark Ranch, which burned down as a result of the lightning-strike fires that devastated the Santa Cruz Mountains last August.

OF THE COST OF EACH BOX OF COOKIES:

58%

funds council services (programs, camps, support and resources)

20%

stays with troops as proceeds and girl recognition

21%

goes to the bakery

1%

covers cookie program expenses

Just under 2,000 girls in these three counties are eligible to sell cookies: 1,038 in Sonoma; 763 in Marin; 159 in Napa.

In 19 counties, 34,489 girl members participate in programming focused on entrepreneurship, life skills, outdoors, community service, and STEM.

3,603

number of volunteer-led troops, more adult members than any other Girl Scout council nationwide.

\$319,366

in financial aid was distributed.

149

gold awards and 14,398 outdoor badges were earned.

STATS ARE FOR 2019-2020. PROVIDED BY GIRL SCOUTS OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA