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Issue Date: NFN29 - Summer 2010 (July/August), Posted On: 8/2/2010

## Buyer's Best Friend

By Dan Bolton, Editor, Natural Food Network

Managing wholesale direct orders is increasingly unmanageable.

The explosion of artisan vendors that retailers rely on to differentiate their stores creates a mountain of work. And unlike one-stop distributor orders, placing orders directly with suppliers requires calls, emails and faxes. It can take hours for buyers to research each vendor - from understanding their story, to payment terms, initial order discounts, order minimums, shipping terms, and more.

Orders require POs, invoices, shipping notices, confirmations and packing slips. Brokers add an extra party to these unstructured communications. While some manufacturers offer wholesale ordering online, this requires buyers to visit dozens of manufacturer websites, each with different accounts, processes, passwords and requirements.

Joyce Guan, president of the San Francisco-based California Girl Foods brokerage, is using a new online ordering tool for wholesale buyers she helped design with extensive input from retail buyers and suppliers.

"Buyer's Best Friend models the way wholesalers buy and sell food," says Guan. "We made BBF easy and fast to find rich product information, by category and location, which buyers find intuitive," she says.

"The goal is to narrow the search so that buyers arrive at a smaller set they can thoroughly research. The idea is not to determine one optimal choice but find a few practical choices," says co-founder Adam Sah. If this sounds like a search engine, it's because Sah worked at three successful search engine companies, most recently as a senior engineer at Google.

"For suppliers, it must be easy to upload their details," observes Sah. "BBF requires zero IT knowledge," says Sah. "If you can receive email orders, and edit a spreadsheet, that's all you need to know to sell your products," he says.



Adam Sah and Joyce Guan

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The software permits real-time team editing and notifications, making it easy for larger companies to coordinate teams. These are techniques Sah pioneered at Google Research and placed into the public domain.

BBF provides each producer with a page to tell their story, show their location, payment terms, order minimum and shipping policies. It offers buyers a one-click way to request samples or to schedule a visit from a salesperson or broker. "Instead of spending hours researching new producers, buyers can learn about many producers in minutes - at 6a.m., 9p.m., or whenever they choose," says Sah.

A reorder page shows all regularly-ordered SKUs, and buyers can print this page, check inventory, then reorder in one click, he says.

"It's easy to customize BBF and connect it with existing software from QuickBooks and Excel, to enterprise scale systems, reducing the errors created by double data entry. Data and reports are easily exported for merchandise managers, planners, promotion and category managers," says Sah.

Google docs products: McQuade's Chutney

product name	in pkg photo	samples available	UPC	categories	shortdesc	longdesc	ingredients
Apple and Red Chili Chutney	http://i740.photobucket.com/.../mkg.jpg	y	64301-10215-4	Jam, Jelly & Marmalade	The heat from the red chilies complements the fat apple chunks and mustard seeds, exploding in bursts of flavor	Red chilies give off just the right amount of heat to complement the fat apple chunks and mustard seeds, that explode in bursts of flavor. This chutney goes nicely with sausage or salad—or you can eat it right out of the jar, too!	Apples, onions, brown sugar, cider vinegar, raisins, red chilies, mustard seeds, allspice, ginger, turmeric, black pepper, ground cloves
Curried Banana Chutney	http://i740.photobucket.com/.../mkg.jpg	y	64301-10216-1	Jam, Jelly & Marmalade	lingering complex finish of curry spices and sweet	devoted customers pairs this with peanut butter sandwiches.	Bananas, raisins, powder, cinnamon, cumin, salt
Fig n' Ginger Chutney	http://i740.photobucket.com/.../mkg.jpg	y	64301-10217-0	Jam, Jelly & Marmalade	Luscious chunks of figs swimming in a sweet sauce of ginger, raisins, apples and spices	Our Fig n' Ginger chutney is one of our most popular flavors. With luscious chunks of figs swimming in a sweet sauce of ginger, raisins, apples and spices—the most typical response we get when people try it is: "Wow!"	Dried fig, cider vinegar, brown sugar, ginger, raisins, apples, lemon zest, cloves, allspice, nutmeg, cinnamon, chilies, cayenne
Habanero Chutney	http://i740.photobucket.com/.../mkg.jpg	y			Adds balanced spiciness to almost any food, capturing the essence of the pepper without the pepper's	One of our most popular flavors, our habanero chutney captures the very essence of this pepper without overpowering heat. This versatile chutney will add a well-balanced spiciness to almost any food, including soft scrambled	Apples, habaneros, grape seed oil, cider vinegar, brown sugar, crystallized ginger, garlic, mustard seeds, cumin, cayenne, turmeric,

"As a broker, I manage a multitude of

buyers, product lines, and SKUs," says Guan. "If I can empower buyers to research my product lines online, and place simple reorders themselves, I can focus on larger and more strategic deals, activating distributors and training sales reps. Buyers are eager to order online, instead of getting constantly interrupted by phone calls from vendors."

### Will direct-supply ordering be widely adopted?

Cory Baehr, founder of Cory Baehr Imports in Los Angeles, has 3,000 SKUs of specialty foods spread among 30 lines in the BBF order system. The interface is branded to promote her venture.

"Buyers respond well to the system," she says.

"Training customers to go online was easy. Streamlining orders is very valuable and they like the convenience of ordering night or day," she says. "I like the fact that searches return picture and price together. Using a separate price book is totally irritating," says Baehr.

"The system also opened up more territory for me as a broker with a broader range of customers and lets me service smaller customers more easily," she says.

One thing is certain; buyers are always short of time, says Emily Duffelmeyer, chocolate buyer for Zingerman's Deli in Ann Arbor, Michigan. "A site like this might become an indispensable part of a weekly routine of placing orders and catching up on news," she says. "For others, it might be a place to log in once a month to see what is new and request samples."

BBF is still in its infancy, says Sah. "There are many ways for BBF to evolve. Our roadmap is determined by feedback from buyers, brokers, producers, and salespeople." To learn more, visit [www.bbfdirect.com](http://www.bbfdirect.com)