



Miami University students invent mobile food donation app to target young crowd

May 6, 2014

CINCINNATI -- A group of Miami University students invented a way for you to select a can of beans, a box of cereal or even a carton of eggs to donate to your local food bank—all while never leaving your couch.

By downloading NomNom Nation, a free smartphone app that rolled out to Android users last week, people can allocate donations to listed items most needed by their local food bank.

"Some people don't like giving to causes because they feel like they're just blindly giving money to a cause," said Brent Bielinski, the 25-year-old CEO of Cincinnati-based [NomNom Nation](#), LLC. "This kind of allows people to get a similar experience to actually buying the food themselves and dropping it off."

The app is the first of its kind to allow donors to make specific donations through their smartphones, and it's a move to target young donors who would otherwise likely never travel to a food bank themselves.

NomNom Nation encourages friendly competition through a monthly "food race," where users can form groups and challenge each other to donate the most.

"We're racing the food from your phone to your local food bank. You don't have to set up the bins and have everybody drop the food off and spend all that extra gas and time collecting it," said Bielinski.

For the next month, donations made through the app will go only to the Shared Harvest Foodbank in Fairfield, which serves a five-county region, as Bielinski and his two partners make sure everything works as it should.

The food bank can purchase eight meals with just \$1. App users donated 360 meals in just two days.

"The children who receive free and reduced breakfast and lunches are soon to be home for summer and their parents are facing feeding them one or two extra meals per week. They don't have the budget, so launching the app at this time could be better for us," said Tina Osso, executive director at the Shared Harvest Foodbank.

The Ohio Association of Foodbanks has invested \$5,000 in the NomNom Nation LLC., so the local company can offer a free IOS version of their app allowing iPhone users to use it this June. The association says it will support the young entrepreneurs with their plan to take the app state--and eventually--nationwide. There are 12 member food banks in Ohio and 205 across the country.

"I was quite frankly blown away," said Lisa Hamler-Fugitt, director of the Ohio Association of Foodbanks. "I've worked with a lot of major corporations over time and I

was really shocked at the thorough, extensive research and the development that they had done as well as the business plan."

Bielinski runs the company out of his Cincinnati living room and meets with his partners on Google Hangout. He works part-time at a local construction company to pay his rent, as he waits for the business to make a profit.

"In the entrepreneurial community, there's a term called boot strapping, which is basically when you're trying to start a business but you don't have any money. And obviously coming out of college, I didn't have any money," he said.

He founded the company two years ago with three friends during a startup competition at Miami University. Bielinski graduated from Miami in 2013 with a bachelor's degree in business.

"Some people think entrepreneurship is sitting in a room, throwing darts at a board and seeing what sticks," said Bielinski. "That wasn't our philosophy.

The college student wanted to start a company that would alleviate a social problem, but it took a trip to the Oxford Community Choice Pantry, where their food supply had significantly declined, for the purpose of his business to take shape.

"Here we are at Miami University -- a really nice college town with a lot of affluence among the student population, but there's still a pretty strong hunger problem," he said. "All of a sudden, I was like wait a minute. [The problem] isn't thousands of miles away. It's a quarter of a mile away. It's right in my backyard."

The group won first place in the startup competition, but their idea didn't stop there.

"We went out and we started testing our assumption and our hypothesis, and they said 'Wow, this is a really great idea. We think you should keep pursuing it,'" he said.

So Bielinski surveyed grocery store shoppers about their donation habits and made dozens of trips to meet with food bank directors.

"There are a just incredibly passionate people who are really enthusiastic about ending hunger in America," he said. "I share that passion. I share that enthusiasm."

He eventually met Shared Harvest Foodbank director Tina Osso, who would be the first to jump on board.

"I didn't even know this was possible," said Osso. "It's thrilling. It really is. These guys are just a little younger than my son."

Osso said the food bank, which distributed 7.1 million pounds of food last year to people in Butler, Warren, Preble, Darke and Miami counties, has continuously struggled to reach a younger donor crowd.

"Our volunteer base and our donor base are graying. You know, the average age of a volunteer in our pantry network is 68 years old. We need the strong arms and hearts of younger people," said Osso.

But she hopes the new app will help with that. She said the food bank has sent out postcards about its partnership with NomNom Nation and it would begin publicizing the app on social platforms Tuesday.

Bielinski said the company will eventually charge participating food banks five percent of the donations generated from the app in order to sustain the company.

"None of us are looking at this as a way to get rich or wealthy. If anything, I'd love to have this be kind of a lifestyle business where I can live simply, comfortably and not need a whole lot of money at all," he said.

Watch the video below to find out how the app works.

