

CALIFORNIA HOT DOG CART BUSINESS MANUAL

Getting Started in Your New Hot Dog Cart Business

Many people long for a job that gives them independence, enjoyment and, at the same time, a decent wage. A hot dog cart business can be just that kind of job. But that does not mean that it won't take effort, careful planning and diligence. This business guide is designed to show our customers how to start their new business with a minimum of cost and, hopefully, avoid any snags and nasty surprises.

There are essentially about 8 steps in starting a hot dog cart business. These steps involve the cart operator doing some necessary prep work in advance of heating up that first hot dog. These steps are as follows:

1. Evaluate hot dog cart locations.
2. Select the right hot dog cart for you.
3. Obtain your business license and location permit.
4. Obtain your health department permit.
5. Set up key suppliers.
6. Get your financing.
7. Order your new hot dog cart.
8. Follow the [Hot Dog Cart Operations Manual](#) .

These steps do not absolutely guarantee success. However, if you add hard work and determination, it is more likely that you are going to start on an enjoyable new career with less hassle and grief. Now let's look at each of these 8 steps in detail.

Evaluate hot dog cart locations.

You first need to carefully evaluate different possible locations for setting up your hot dog stand. Scout out and find the best locations in your area and check to see if they are available. You may find that you will have to pay rent to private or commercial owners for a really lucrative location in a mall or busy parking lot. If so, you will need to consider whether the cost of the rent will be worth it. That is, will the location pay for itself. As a rule of thumb, the monthly rent should not exceed 10 percent of your monthly sales.

You may also need to acquire a location license in addition to your business license if you want to park your cart on a public property like a park, side walk or street. Check with your municipality for details regarding locations and permit requirements. This is discussed further in the section concerning business licensing.

The best locations for a food vending cart have a lot of pedestrian traffic. They should be located near a large population of workers, visitors or shoppers. The location should enable your cart to be highly visible to this flow of foot traffic. It should also be easy to access for you to load your daily supplies or position the cart. It is also better if there are no other competing food businesses nearby.

Here are some examples of possible permanent locations for a hot dog cart:

- Parking lot of large retail store, factory, plaza, or mall.
- Industrial park or commercial complex.
- Park, beach, pier, zoo, golf course.
- Downtown street corner or parking lot.
- University, college, high school.
- Court house, military base, government complex.
- Office building, hospital, call center.
- Transportation hub such as bus, train, subway, airport, marina, truck stop, service station, car wash.

In addition to having a regular daily permanent location many hot dog cart operators also set up at temporary locations to catch extra business after regular hours. These special event locations can be very profitable. Here are some examples of these that you should investigate:

- Sporting events such as soccer, baseball, football, etc., tournaments, little league and amateur through to professional.
- Car shows and rallies, farm shows, boat shows, air shows, industrial shows, home shows, county fairs, cultural events, carnivals, fishing derbies, auctions, parades, flea markets, music festivals, antique and craft shows, tourist attractions.
- Grand openings, open houses, large sales events, business anniversaries, company picnics & banquets, conventions.
- Charity events, church /club /school functions.
- Large construction sites.
- Catering parties and anniversaries.

While these special event locations will generate a large one time income if they are large enough, it is important to have a regular permanent location to provide you with a steady income. Do not sacrifice your consistent dependable presence at your permanent location in order to serve a one time temporary location. Your regular customers will come to depend upon your daily service. You need to maintain that loyal customer base. It will prove more reliable and profitable to you in the long term.

Obtain a business license and location permit.

The next step is to get a business license from your local city government. This will generally cost anywhere from \$60.00 to \$400.00 depending on your city. The larger cities tend to charge more for these than do the smaller towns.

The municipal government may also require that you to obtain a separate vendor location permit for each and every location that you plan to use. Even some large cities have a limited number of approved vendor locations available and there is often a waiting list. So you will need to apply and get on that list.

Special Event permits may also be required for setting up your food cart at special temporary locations such as those listed above in the locations section.

Check with your local municipal authorities about all three of these types of licenses. In some places, all three are required. In other places, only the business license is needed. At the same time, be sure to check on the local by-laws for food vendors. This can often even be done on-line at the city's web site. A bit of research in these areas can make sure that you avoid fines and even the loss of your business license.

Obtain a health department permit.

This permit will probably cost between \$250.00 and \$400.00 depending on the county. Check our Links section on this web site to locate and contact your local county health department.

The local health department wants to make sure that both you and your new food vending cart meet new California Retail Food Code (Cal Code) standards and that you will provide a safe healthy service to the general public.

In order for them to ensure this, the health department will want to check certain technical requirements of your cart. These vary a little from county to county. You will need to send them the plans and schematics for your cart for them to review. They want to check that the hotdog cart will meet all of the state health code. These details, drawings and specifications can be downloaded from our web site in the Cart Selection section that shows the pictures and schematics of all the various hot dog carts.

California county health departments will require that the hotdog cart be "NSF approved". The NSF (National Sanitation Foundation) is a quality assurance agency that provides guidelines and certification for food equipment. They have detailed specifications that manufacturers of food service equipment must meet regarding standards of design, operation and materials of construction. As a leader in hotdog cart design and manufacture, this approval is not a problem for us. NSF approval is standard on our California Series of hot dog carts.

Familiarize yourself with all of the health code regulations for your area. These may affect the types of foods that you can serve from your hot dog cart, the options that you will need to order with your cart, and thus also the model of cart that you pick. Our online [Cal Code Tutorial](#) will give you a good start in understanding the requirements for operating a hot dog cart in California.

The local county health department will also want to physically inspect your cart when you receive it and before you start operating. The inspector will check over the cart to ensure it is in full conformance with local standards and will then issue you with a certificate. This will also involve a one time inspection fee.

In addition, you will be required to take an approved course in safe food handling. The safe food handling training course may range anywhere from 4 hours in length to a couple of full

working days. At any rate, it will fully inform you of all of the local county health requirements for your hot dog cart. Plan on paying a separate fee for this course. It may be offered by the health department directly or by another authorized food service company. You will have to take a food safety course every 5 years to recertify in California.

The [Hot Dog Cart Operations and Maintenance Manual](#) found here on our web site is also a good place to start for general operating procedures for conforming to most health codes. Keep in mind that it is a general summary of health guidelines. Local health codes may be more or less strict in nature from what we have presented and your local health department may have slightly different specific requirements or procedures.

If you have any further questions regarding dealing with local health code regulations, we are happy to help.

Set up suppliers.

You will need to get set up with a local commissary. A commissary is a licensed food establishment (such as a deli) that will prepare and store certain perishable food items for you. Because they are already set up to properly receive, prepare and store foods, they are set up to deal with and conform with all of the stringent health department regulations regarding preparing and storing perishable foods such as meat and cheese. The commissary will also provide a location for your food stuffs to be delivered all day long at times when you wouldn't otherwise be available. The commissary is where you will store, load up, clean and unload your hot dog cart.

So basically, for a fee, the commissary provides refrigeration equipment and a storage area, receives and prepares some of the perishable foods for you, and conforms to all the health department regulations for these services. They will store your hot dog meat for you and prepare your daily supply of chopped onions or grated cheese. So having a good rapport with a quality commissary is a real asset to your business. It is also a legal requirement for a hot dog cart in California.

You will need to find quality, well priced, local suppliers for all the different consumable items you will be using in operating your hot dog cart. These items include any food items the commissary does not supply and may include your hot dog meat, condiments, drinks and side order foods that you will sell, as well as cleaning supplies, paper goods, propane gas, etc.

Find a supplier for your hot dog buns. You may want to have a couple of sizes such as standard and jumbo, and maybe even a deluxe bun like a cheese bun, poppy seed bun, or an onion bun. Often times a small local bakery is an excellent source for fresh quality buns. Otherwise, you may wish to purchase from one of the large discount grocery chain stores or one of the national bakery supply companies. Some of these are listed on our Links page for your reference.

Find a local supplier for your hot dog meat. You may wish to offer standard size, jumbo, garlic, polish, spicy, bacon wrapped, or whatever style is the local regional favorite.

Sometimes a local meat processor or butcher shop is the ideal source. Others use one of the national brands. Some of these are listed on our Links page for your reference.

You will need to comparison shop for suppliers of other items. These include condiments, potato chips, sodas, other beverages, plastic cutlery, napkins, hot dog bags, take-out bags, cleaning supplies, sanitizing solution, and propane gas. These items can be sourced from specialized restaurant supply companies, big box stores, discount supermarkets, commercial cleaning supply companies, and so on. While many of these can be stored in your home office, take care that even non-perishable items are stored in a manner that conforms to any local health code regulations.

See the [Links](#) section on our web page for links to some of the major national suppliers for hot dog meats, buns, and other specialized items used in the hot dog vending cart business.

Secure financing.

If you require financing to start your new business, you will need to go see your bank about a business loan or a line of credit.

Alternatively, we can put you in touch with our own financing and equipment leasing specialist.

To deal with the bank or financier you may need to compose a simple straight forward business plan. You can get business planning software at a business supply store. Otherwise help may be available through a local government organization that assists new business start ups.

Before they give you money, the bank or finance company wants to see that you have done your homework regarding your new business. They want to know that you are prepared for what you are getting into and are therefore a good risk.

To begin with, you will need to make a list of your business start up expenses. This list will include not just the purchase cost of the hotdog cart but also all the costs of the various licenses, permits, inspections, training, location rent, etc., that we have discussed in the above sections. Other start up expenses include the initial inventory cost of the food and other supplies, commissary expense, any auxiliary equipment purchases, insurance, and any other business expenses such as a cell phone and bank accounts.

The finance company will want to be sure that your new business is viable. So they will want to see that you have done some marketing research before hand. Some help is available online at www.hot-dog.org regarding good statistics on hot dog consumption. You should do some serious scouting and recording of details regarding your location including the population of the potential customer market, the lunch time traffic volume, the number

of and location of your competitors, and so on. This can be compared with the national statistics found on hot-dog.org to give a realistic idea of your market potential. If you don't have a financier in mind, we can recommend one. Call our service desk.

Order your hot dog cart.

Place your order. You will need to send a 50% down payment to start your order. The last 50% is due when the cart is ready to ship. Be sure to include all of your needed cart options at time of order.

The cart delivery will vary from a few days to a few weeks depending on order volume and supplies at time of order. You should be given an idea of delivery when you order. Use this time in between ordering and receiving to tie up any loose ends such as with other suppliers, the commissary, the health department, and the location landlord. This would be an excellent time to take that food service training course.

The cart will be sent fully crated for its protection during shipment. It should arrive in good condition but sometimes damage occurs. Unpack it and inspect it for damage and completeness when you receive it. Note any obvious damage on the transport company's waybill before you sign it and get the driver to sign or initial the damage noted. Do not accept a badly damaged cart. Reject the shipment. If you have a digital camera, take pictures of the damage before you uncrate it. Then email them to us. Call us first before uncrating a damaged cart.

It would also be a good idea to start the cart up at home and become familiar with all its features and functions before heading out to your vending site for the first time. So do a trial run with family and friends. This will provide a friendly audience and will highlight any items you have forgotten or procedures you need to practice. Ask them for reasonable realistic feedback on your product and presentation. (Carefully choose the right friends for this trial run. You want ones that will take it seriously and give you good constructive criticism.)

Follow the Operations Manual Guidelines.

Become familiar with the contents of our [Hot Dog Cart Operations Manual](#) . In fact, keep a copy with your cart at all times. If you have employees, make sure they have read it and understand it. The information there-in has been carefully researched and organized to help you get off to a good start and stay that way. It will save you time, money and frustration. The operations manual will help you through the daily operations procedure and will keep you, your cart and your customers happy and healthy.

If you require additional information that is not covered in the manual, please contact us. If you think we have missed anything or if you have information or experience that you think we should include, please let us know. We wish you the very best on your new hot dog vending cart enterprise.