

tion item," according to FreshDirect's Druckman. "It sets us apart from the competition."

The best online services hire and train employees whose only job is to select produce. "We like to have it so that the produce is better than the consumer can pick for themselves," says Peapod's Stallone.

At Acme, "We make sure we send out exactly what we would send to our own houses," says Pieciuk, who believes the quality of produce delivered to his customers is no longer an issue. In fact, comments about produce make up only 2 percent of the complaints Acme receives from online shoppers. At the same time, one out of every 61 Web customers sends Acme a compliment about the quality of its produce. (The national average, he says, is one out of 72.)

Produce delivered to homes has another advantage, in that it does not spend time sitting in a cart and then in a car. "We can keep the cold chain intact, so they'll notice produce lasts longer," adds Stallone of Peapod, which places groceries in individual cold totes from the time they are shopped until they are brought to customers' doors.

At Acme, shopped items are placed in

color-coded totes (blue for frozen, red for refrigerated and gray for dry) and placed in the appropriate storage areas until they are loaded onto temperature-controlled vans with refrigerator, freezer and dry compartments. "There's no time when these things are just sitting around," says Pieciuk. Employees are trained to know which produce items are refrigerated and which items

choose the ripeness of its produce. Instead, he says, "We've chosen to try and pick the way the majority of people want it. Wherever we can on the Website, we try to explain how you're going to receive some of that."

FreshDirect offers a number of solutions that set the service apart from its competitors. "We do sell Cheerios and Bounty like everyone else does, but that's not how we're



On-line produce shopping saves consumers both time and gasoline.

— such as bananas and tomatoes — are not.

The intact cold chain is especially noticeable when it comes to highly perishable items, such as berries and salads. "Bagged salads are our No. 1 selling produce item in online commerce," notes Pieciuk.

It is particularly important that produce bought online lasts as long as possible in the consumers' homes. "The consumers who shop online will buy a lot more than if they would buy in the store," says Pieciuk. "They purchase once a month and have large orders delivered."

MAKING LIFE EASIER

Online shopping is all about convenience, so consumers need to know they will not have to waste time returning unsatisfactory items to the store. For that reason, customer service is an important part of Acme's program. "Even though this is an online business, we have no problem giving consumers a call if a store needs to substitute one item for another," says Pieciuk. Employees limit the number of calls they make to consumers — shoppers are, after all, time-starved — but Pieciuk has found, "Most of our customers really like this. They really enjoy that personal touch."

Each Acme store keeps a logbook of consumer comments. Whenever a complaint is entered, employees review the issue — Was the item close to its expiration date? Was the quality not up to snuff? — so that the problem does not occur again.

Many online retailers allow customers to get picky about the details, such as whether they want large apples or small or whether they like their bananas green or yellow.

"It's definitely a balancing act between too much selection and not enough," says Druckman. FreshDirect does not let consumers

going to win," says Druckman. "Our customers love what we've done from a meal perspective." A shopper can browse through the site's recipes and, finding one she likes, click a button to instantly add the necessary ingredients to her cart.

Because so many of their customers are time-starved, FreshDirect offers a number of quick meal options under the banner "Easy meals prepared by expert chefs." These include 4-Minute-Meals — individual servings in special microwavable containers that pressure-cook the raw ingredients in just four minutes. Many of these options are co-branded with some of New York's top restaurants, such as Rosa Mexicano and Tabla.

DELIVERY OPTIONS

Most grocery delivery services charge by the order, usually between \$5 and \$10 per delivery plus a fuel charge of under a dollar when gas prices are high. The cost may not seem like much to shoppers who place orders of \$100 or more, but to others the price can be a deterrent.

While she was in graduate school, Jennifer Baird, 29, of Chicago, IL, often split Peapod orders with friends. "It is a little bit expensive to get groceries just for myself but it can be worth it if you buy groceries for several people," she says. "I haven't ordered with them for a while — since school just because I'm broke — but when I could afford it, the service was very much worth it."

FreshDirect is trying to appeal more to customers like Baird with delivery passes, which let customers order as often as they want at a price of \$59 for six months or \$99 for a year. "It basically allows people to get in the habit of using FreshDirect on a regular basis," says Druckman.

The price of delivery rarely covers the

The Age Of Information

Customers who shop online often get their information online. Now they can get both from the same Websites. Peapod.com, the Web site for Peapod, Inc., Lake Zurich, IL, offers information on what is in season and how to handle produce, such as which items should be refrigerated and how best to ripen them.

Peapod also lets shoppers sort items by nutritional content as well as by price. Diabetic? You can see which fruits contain the least carbohydrates. On a diet? Click a button and you'll see which salad dressings contain the most fat. Soon shoppers will also be able to sort items by individual vitamins and minerals, according to Tony Stallone, vice president of merchandising.

Not long from now, Peapod shoppers will also be able rate items they have bought according to quality, an idea that Peapod took from *LeShop.ch*, Switzerland's leading online supermarket. By the end of the year, Stallone hopes customers will be able to write online reviews for other customers. For now, shoppers can see which items rate as most popular. In the vegetable category, that would be tomatoes on-the-vine and Hass avocados. Zesty sprouts appear to be the least sought out. **pb**