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Getting Your Product Onto Retail Shelves

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Business owners with a product to sell often dream of winning shelf space in the Wal-Marts and Targets of the world. But these days, with the recovery dragging, it is a challenge to get shelf space in any store.

Here is how Brian Chossek, the president of [Garlic Gold](#) in Ventura, Calif., won his first account — at [Gelson's](#), a Southern California grocery chain that now has 18 stores. Mr. Chossek went to Gelson's Santa Barbara location late one night when things were slow and buttonholed the produce manager, who then connected him with the produce buyer. Mr. Chossek persuaded the buyer to let him give an in-store demonstration that he hoped would prove that Garlic Gold, a seasoning that features toasted organic garlic nuggets, would sell.

During a four-hour demo, Mr. Chossek sold 92 bottles. After that, he gave demonstrations in the store every weekend and four weeks later, Garlic Gold was sold in a second store. Within six months, it was on the shelves at every Gelson's store. Every time he approached a new Gelson's location, he gave the store a free case of the product to test. Garlic Gold is now carried in more than 3,000 stores nationwide.

This guide offers suggestions and lessons learned by other tenacious owners who have managed to get their products onto retail shelves:

START SMALL AND LOCAL You might be aiming for [Target](#), but big-box retailers want to see a track record. Online sales are one way to provide evidence that your product can sell. Another is to take it to small stores, maybe even stores where you shop.

When Dana Rubinstein and Tamar Rosenthal started [Dapple](#), a line of natural cleaning products for homes with babies, they envisioned it lining the shelves at drugstore chains like [Rite Aid](#) and [Duane Reade](#). Their repeated calls went unreturned, however, so they started taking their products to smaller stores in their Manhattan neighborhood and asking owners if they would carry them.

"We went to one baby boutique where we shopped, carrying a couple of cases of product, and asked the owner if he would give us a chance," Ms. Rubinstein said. They got their first yes. "He gave us really good placement because we were his customers and also moms who knew lots of other moms."

LISTEN TO THE BUYERS Visit the stores — and specific departments — where you want your product sold. Buyers want to know what differentiates your product from what they already sell, said Grace Kang, a former buyer who is chief executive of [Retail Recipes](#), a consulting firm in New York.

Jill Cartwright went a step further. While developing a line of ergonomic diaper bags for her business, [Go GaGa](#), she got a part-time job at what is now called [Isis Parenting](#), a maternity and baby store in Boston. Ms. Cartwright used the job as an opportunity to study the market and the competition. She also sought buyer feedback. "I talked to other local retailers and buyers to make sure I had the features they wanted, the color palette and the price point," she said.

She wound up changing the design so the bags could be used as all-purpose totes, too. And Isis was one of the first stores to carry [Go GaGa's](#) bags, which she said were now carried by 150 retailers.

EXPECT TO HEAR NO When Danielle LiVolsi was trying to get her organic multi-nut butter, [NuttZo](#), into [Whole Foods](#) stores in Southern California, she made a batch in her San Diego kitchen, arranged it in a basket, grabbed her best friend and drove to the chain's offices in Los Angeles. "We both had years of experience in sales so we felt pretty confident," Ms. LiVolsi said. "We were shut down so fast, we didn't even get past the receptionist. We just left the basket."

She e-mailed the buyer the next morning and was told her sample could not be accepted because it had not come in a tamper-proof jar, so Ms. LiVolsi asked her manufacturer to do the smallest run possible and soon had 500 jars.

She sent a case of [NuttZo](#) back to the buyer and received an e-mail a few days later telling her they were passing on it because she had no sales force and no sales. "For most people, that would have been a no, but not in my world," Ms. LiVolsi said. "There's always a way in."

From another business owner at a small-business networking group, she learned of [Whole Foods' local producer program](#), which encourages businesses to sell products directly to their local [Whole Foods](#) stores. Ms. LiVolsi took some [NuttZo](#) into the [Whole Foods](#) closest to her home, calling first to make sure the grocery team leader was there: "I walked in with my jars, gave him my elevator pitch and he put me on the shelf." She then visited 17 of the 29 [Whole Foods](#) stores in Southern California, opening countless jars of [NuttZo](#) along the way for buyers to try.

GO TO TRADE SHOWS Trade shows can be expensive but offer exposure to a wide range of retailers looking for new products. It is an especially good way to reach small stores, Mr. Chossek said. He walked away from his first industry trade show, [The Natural Products Expo West](#), with 50 orders from small stores from around the country. It is crucial, however, to pick the right show. If you aim for one that is too broadly focused, you may go unnoticed or feel out of place.

Christopher Louis, founder of [Fetch](#), a tennis-themed sportswear company, spent \$6,000 and a week exhibiting at a clothing trade show in Las Vegas in 2007. To his surprise, he said, he found that, "it was mostly hip-hop and skateboard fashions — not country-club wear. I didn't get any orders." He now exhibits only at trade shows geared toward tennis. He also started asking for a list of buyers attending the shows and then cold-calls them repeatedly until he gets them on the phone.

CONSIDER A BROKER If you cannot afford to hire a dedicated sales person, you can contract with a broker or several brokers in different regions to sell for you, said Kevin McLaughlin, principal in [Resound Marketing](#), a Princeton, N.J., consultancy that helps emerging companies get their products into stores.

Brokers — also called independent manufacturer's representatives — get paid only when they make a sale, generally a fee of 5 to 15 percent of the deal. And they usually have relationships with regional buyers at different retailers in specific industries.

MAKE THE BUYER CALL YOU The best way to get your product onto a store's shelves is to have the buyer call you because customers are asking for it. Those customers have usually read about it — or have heard about it from someone who has read about it.

Send your product to bloggers and ask for feedback to start building a relationship. If they get to know your product, they may write about it.

It was [vegan](#) food bloggers, said Susan Johnson, chief executive of [Xan Confections](#), which produces all-natural specialty chocolates, who helped draw attention to Xan's line of vegan chocolates. Xan chocolates are now carried in 200 stores in 20 states.

"Everything about getting your product on store shelves has to do with building relationships," Ms. Johnson said. "Relationships with bloggers, brokers, buyers and, of course, the customer."