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**Organic Foods Special Report**

**Store owners: It costs more, but no shortage of buyers**

**BYLINE:** Bill Church correspondent

Rick Noble and Gary Hyatt sell groceries the old-fashioned way. They have a loyal customer base that comes back week after week. They provide personal service around their neighborhood store, holding baskets for customers who need such help and carrying groceries to the car. If a customer requests a product, they get it in, causing customers to say, "I can't believe they listened to me." And they do all this with a very important twist -- almost all of their stock is organic.

"We're the only organic grocery in the area," said Noble, co-owner of Florida Organic on Dixie Highway in Rio. "Some health stores sell some organic groceries, but pills are their main business."

"We buy only from accredited certified organic farmers," Hyatt said. "We buy local when we can and from Florida distributors if we can. There are not a lot of organic growers in this area, and of course some things don't grow in Florida."

Their clientele comes from as far away as Palm Beach, passing up the Whole Foods store in Palm Beach Gardens. Whole Foods made its name selling organic, but now it's a trendy national chain with organic and non-organic food, Noble and Hyatt said. Wal-Mart also sells organic products. Now, organic is getting lots of media attention, which is good for Florida Organic.

"True organic lovers don't trust the big stores," Noble said.

"Our customers are fanatics about this, and the more people know, the better we look," Hyatt said.

Noble and Hyatt estimate that health care professionals and their patients make up 30 percent of their business. Oncologists tell their cancer patients to stop putting pesticides in their bodies, because their immune systems are weak from chemotherapy.

The organic grocers didn't start out to found a store. Noble read a magazine article about an organic grocery delivery business

in Oregon and sold Hyatt on the idea. In October 2003, they made their first delivery out of Noble's garage in Port St. Lucie after distributing fliers through the neighborhoods. They made 10 deliveries the first week.

In January 2004, they started an online store, which still makes up 30 percent of the business and has good growth prospects for adding delivery areas. Total deliveries have gone to 300 customers, but Hyatt describes the delivery business as a "roller coaster" based on the season.

The Web site, [www.floridaorganic.net](http://www.floridaorganic.net), has about half of the products found in the store. They deliver to Martin, St. Lucie and Palm Beach counties. Even with the current high gasoline prices, delivery is free with a \$40 minimum purchase.

"If a customer has an 'organic emergency,' we'll deliver on demand for a \$5 fee," Noble said.

In June 2004, the pair started selling produce a few doors from their present location and in July 2005, they moved into a storefront where Hyatt once managed an air-conditioning company. They laid tile, moved walls, built the cooler and Hyatt painted the murals.

"It was only going to be a delivery business," Noble said. "We just went where our customers took us."

Organic products cost more, but Florida Organic's customer base of 80 per week -- 160 to 180 in season -- keep coming back.

"Our customers have made a choice to eat healthy, knowing they will have to pay more," Noble said. "They relax in here and they feel and look better."

"These are good down-to-earth people," Hyatt said. "We've had just one bounced check in almost three years in business. They want us to succeed."

Noble and Hyatt's said they want to add wholesale, filling a niche for restaurants, country clubs, catering services, medical facilities and, especially, schools.

"With the current plague of childhood obesity, you could do some good in the world by providing schools healthy organic foods," Noble said.

They will need funding to do that, but they are dedicated to succeeding where they are.

"We've taken baby steps," Hyatt said. "We don't have a sheepskin on the wall, so for now we have to prove the business is profitable and show that it will work."

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