

# EAT MY LUNCH

Buy one, give one

Since 2015, social enterprise Eat My Lunch has been operating a 'buy one, give one' model. The 42-strong team make and sell lunches to businesses and businesspeople — and for every lunch they sell, they donate a nutritious, healthy meal to a hungry child in school. Obviously, lockdown dried up lunch sales and closed schools — but it didn't stop the children needing food. And so founder Lisa King and the Eat My Lunch team worked hard to make sure they got the support they needed to continue their good work.



'Before lockdown we were feeding 2,000 kids a day,' says Lisa. 'Most of those children don't have breakfast before they leave home, and they come to school without food. The meal we provide is very often their main meal of the day.'

As well as a paid workforce, Eat My Lunch has long relied on a team of volunteers to prepare the donated lunches each day. Every morning, a team of some 35 volunteers assembles at Eat My Lunch headquarters to prepare and package the food. From there, drivers deliver lunches to 79 schools, with the school then distributing the meals to the children in need in their community.

The onset of Covid-19 in New Zealand profoundly challenged Eat My Lunch's operating model. Not only did the client base disappear with people working from home, and office catering no longer required, but the volunteers were also no longer available to make the gifted lunches. And, final nail, schools were no longer viable as distribution centres.

Faced with this, Lisa and the team had two clear objectives. 'First, we had to take care of our people — we needed to do all we could to keep everyone safe, and to keep our 42 paid staff employed. Secondly, we had to find a way to keep feeding the kids who depend on us.'

Clearly, Eat My Lunch had to break away from its longstanding 'buy one, give one' model, and find a new way of operating.

'We asked ourselves: What are we really good at? What do we know we can do really well, regardless of what the model looks like?'

The answer was Eat My Lunch's food-delivery capability, which they'd developed over the years: a fleet of vehicles and drivers available to deliver food, and good technology that enables route-planning for efficient delivery. Another strength was their enduring partnership with supermarket operator Foodstuffs (New World, PAK'nSAVE, Four Square), which ensures a resilient supply of food. In Lisa's words: 'We knew we could get food, and we knew we could deliver it!' The organisation was classified as an essential service, and the team set about developing a new model, building on those known areas of strength.

As founder, Lisa took on responsibility for transforming the 'give' side of the business. Recently appointed general manager Kellie Burbidge took on the challenge of finding new ways to reach paying customers — a critical part of operating a socially conscious business. Clear ideas began to emerge on both sides: an offer for paying customers that would see fresh groceries delivered



safely to their homes during lockdown, and home delivery of food parcels to those in need.

As schools wound up ahead of lockdown, the Eat My Lunch team worked with them to reach families in need, inviting them to register for food-parcel delivery to their homes. Registrations poured in, with 2,000 families ultimately requesting support. As lockdown took hold, demand started to grow on the ‘buy’ side of the business, too, with families keen to avoid emerging from their bubbles to visit supermarkets.

‘We were working with a small core team, and tackling challenges we’d never faced before. We went from delivering to 79 schools to 2,000 home addresses — 400 a day! We were solving problems constantly, adapting to overcome challenge after challenge. A week’s worth of food means a much bigger box than a school lunch — and we have a fleet of Minis! We became

experts in packing a whole lot into a small space!

‘It reminded me of the days when we first started back in my house. You just do it — you just make it work. It was very much like being back in start-up mode, with everyone working 12- to 14-hour days just getting everything done.’

The end result saw more than 10,000 food parcels delivered to families in need, all supported by a food-delivery offering that created real value for customers stuck at home during lockdown.

‘As Covid began to take hold, we understandably had advisers recommending that we “forget about the donations, and just pick it all back up after lockdown”. That was never an option for our team. We can’t be Eat My Lunch without meeting our promise to feed hungry kids when things get tough.’

That sense of purpose — coupled with the agility of a small, values-led decision-making team — is what Lisa

believes enabled the team to respond. ‘We know really clearly why we’re here, so when a crisis hits we just figure out what we can do with what we have. We go straight to action, and I think as a team we are very much led by what we think is right.’

Lockdown also saw the team experimenting with new ways to engage their supporters — and to promote their home-delivery food offering — producing their own livestreamed cooking show, uploaded directly to Facebook. The show was a Mystery Box Challenge, challenging participants to produce the best meal possible from an Eat My Lunch ‘mystery box’ of supplies. Hosted by Lisa King and well-known (especially to readers of this book!) author David Downs, the show saw celebrity chefs Josh Emett, Peter Gordon, Michael Meredith and

Nici Wickes compete against a host of brilliant, non-professional Kiwi home chefs. The project was a huge success, and provided some much-needed entertainment and culinary inspiration during lockdown!

After that first lockdown, Eat My Lunch has largely returned to its original operating model, but there were valuable lessons learned that will stay with the business. ‘Our new approach on the “give” side really showed us a way we can change families’ relationships with food. The ability to help kids learn about their food — the collaborations we worked on with Nanogirl Labs and Fonterra to bring learning into the homes we supported — will stay with us. Collaborating and working together enables us to have a much greater impact than we can achieve on our own.’

