

Disseminating Orphan Innovations

By Susan H. Evans & Peter Clarke

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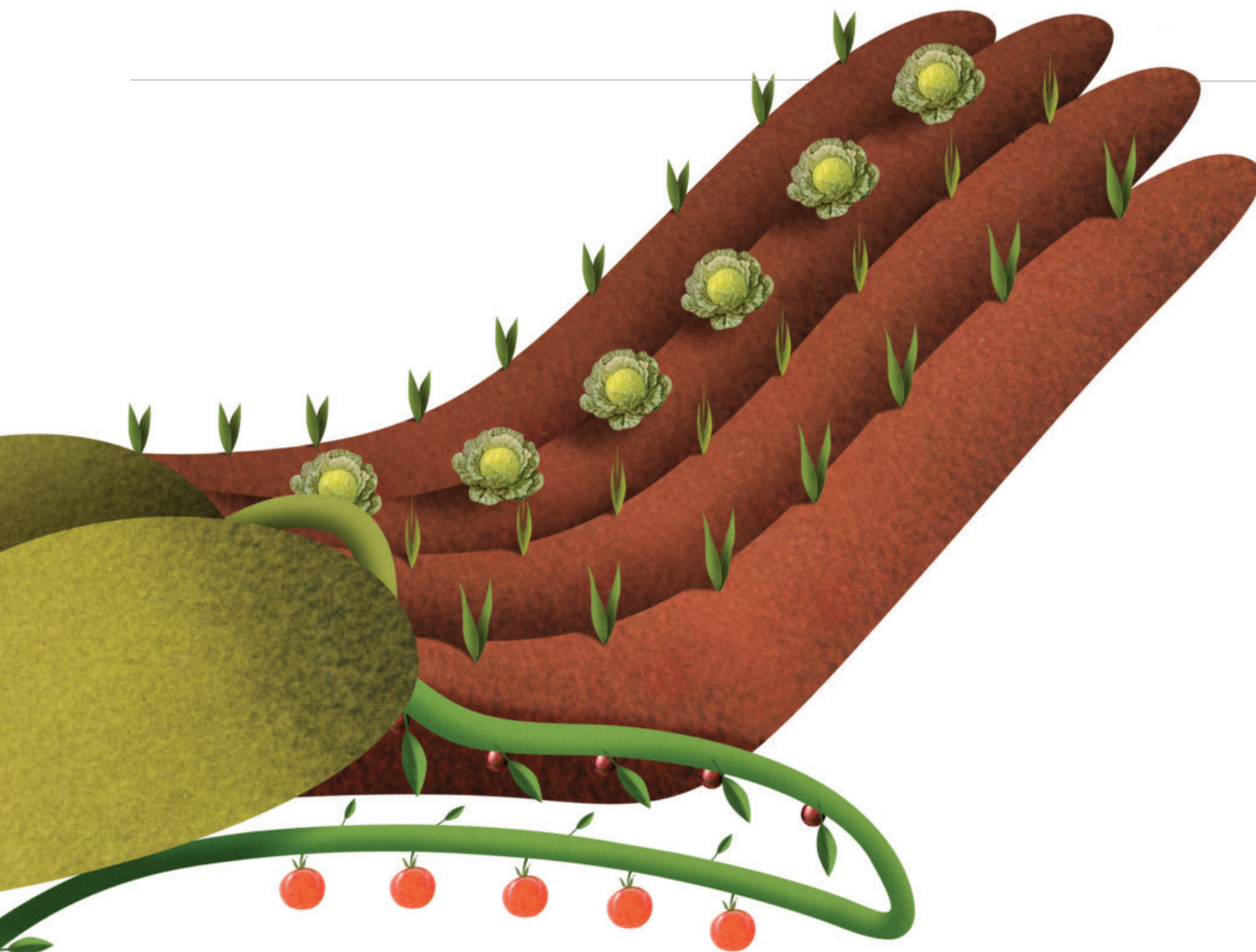
Disseminating Orphan Innovations

The social sector invests a great deal of time and money trying to create social innovations, but pays scant attention to the challenges of spreading successful ones to other locations. Disseminating innovations takes a distinct, sophisticated skill set, one that often requires customizing the program to new circumstances, not replicating.

BY SUSAN H. EVANS & PETER CLARKE

Illustration by Brett Ryder





THE DOCUMENTARY FILM *The Providence Effect*, released in late 2009, quickly drew admiring attention to a K-12 school serving Chicago's blighted West Side. The majority of Providence-St. Mel's (PSM) 700 students come from economically deprived circumstances and single-parent households, but for the past 29 years all graduates have been accepted to college, and many offered scholarships by top institutions. In the film, the school's founder, principal, and teachers are eloquent in explaining PSM's methods. Politicians and celebrities are shown showering praise on the school. A state official proclaims, "I'd like to put this school on a Xerox machine."

One would think that schools around the country would have copied PSM's methods. Strangely, few have. By the film's count, just a handful of other schools among the nation's nearly 15,000 school systems have used these methods. Why not? The principal of the school insists in the film, "It's not rocket science." Nevertheless, the program remains what we call an "orphan innovation."

The Providence Effect offers a stunning reminder that spectacularly effective social programs often fail to take root in other places. The social sector invests intensively to foster innovation, but seems to have less enthusiasm for mastering the skills of transplanting successful innovations to other needy locales. The sector urgently needs insights explaining how to migrate effective solutions from one place to another.

This article tells the story of our experience transplanting a social innovation that was a much-lauded success at its original site but had not spread to other locations. The innovation involves recovering "edible but not sellable" fresh fruits and vegetables and swiftly distributing these nutritious foods to low-income people via food banks,¹ pantries, and other distribution services—a program that would seem easy to replicate. Eventually the innovation did take root elsewhere—at last count, in more than 150 other locations around the United

States—but the process took nearly 20 years and a great deal of trial and error.

We suspect that orphan innovations are the consequence of two complementary but flawed perceptions: that dissemination is straightforward compared with the sophistication and energies required for creating the idea in the first place, and that dissemination is simply a process of replication, reproducing carbon copies of the original idea. Our experience points to the contrary: that dissemination takes a distinct, sophisticated skill set, and that successful dissemination is a process of *customizing* the program to new circumstances, not *replicating*. We hope that our experience and the lessons that we learned can help others scale up social innovations from isolated successes into widely embraced practices.

THE INNOVATOR

One predawn morning in April 1987, retired produce wholesaler Mickey Weiss was driving from his home in Beverly Hills, Calif., to the sprawling produce loading docks southeast of downtown Los Angeles, his former place of business now operated by his son Dennis. Mickey Weiss slowed at a railroad siding and noted homeless people, including families, heating breakfasts of old bread. Later that morning, he stepped to the edge of his son's dock for some fresh air. To his right, a groaning forklift raised a pallet of strawberries above the lip of a giant refuse bin, dumping more than 1,000 pounds of fresh fruit into the container.

In his 40-year career, Weiss had seen excess goods discarded thousands of times. He understood that one-third to one-half of fresh produce never reaches a consumer's table. Instead, these perishable fruits and vegetables are not even harvested, or they are dumped into landfills at various points between field and grocery display. The reasons for this waste vary: Buyers, either wholesale or retail, fail to appear before the produce has declined in freshness; or vagaries in pricing and requirements for speedy transport render the food expendable.

That morning, however, something clicked in Weiss's mind. Why dump so much nutritious food just because its shelf life has become too short to survive commercial delays between wholesaling and retailing? Weiss was a generous man, a frequent supporter of charities and educational causes. But until that spring day in 1987, he had never put together two ideas: vast, discarded surpluses in his own produce industry and urgent human needs just a few blocks away.

Weiss came up with a plan. He persuaded management of the wholesale market to lend him 2,500 square feet of dock space, and surrounded it with cyclone fencing. He began to solicit his former competitors to donate produce about to be discarded. Weiss could spot distressed goods, like zucchini starting to brown at the vine end, and knew how to pry donations from hard-nosed wholesalers. He organized high school volunteers to telephone charities throughout

SUSAN H. EVANS is research scientist at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism. She is the co-director (with Peter Clarke) of *From the Wholesaler to the Hungry* and the co-author (with Clarke) of *Surviving Modern Medicine*.

PETER CLARKE is professor at the Annenberg School and in the Department of Preventive Medicine at the Keck School of Medicine. He and Evans have field-tested and are refining Quick! Help for Meals, a computer-based system that creates customized recipes and food tips for clients of charitable food pantries.

the Los Angeles region, asking if they could use free fresh produce. Community pantries, churches, rehab missions, low-income daycare centers, battered women's shelters, and other agencies quickly responded, sending their vehicles to Weiss's space. Soon, millions of pounds of healthy fresh produce were being diverted from landfill and onto the plates of hungry children and adults.

Weiss's charitable produce dock did not escape notice. He testified at a congressional hearing, received the Presidential End Hunger award, and was named by President George H. W. Bush as one of "a thousand points of light." The *Los Angeles Times* and other media wrote feature articles about Weiss and his dock's work. With such gold-plated endorsements and wide publicity, Weiss's idea was certain to spread quickly—or so it would have seemed.

THE DISSEMINATORS

Four years after Weiss had launched his bold idea, we learned of it in a circuitous manner. Peter Clarke was dean of the Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism at the University of Southern California. Susan H. Evans was the school's director of academic development. A letter arrived one day from an administrator at the U.S. Department of Agriculture who suggested that the school, with its interests in media and publicity, should look into the charitable dock, just a couple of miles away.

We were stunned by what we discovered. Weiss was charming, shrewd, public-spirited, and eloquent about his mission, and his Charitable Distribution Facility was alleviating hunger and improving human nutrition on a grand scale, sometimes distributing 2 million pounds of fruits and vegetables monthly. So why had Weiss's work attracted just one imitator, the Houston Food Bank?

This innovation, not unlike other successful social programs, had stalled. It had become an orphan innovation. Where were the adopters?

At the time, we didn't know the answer to that question. But we did know this: Food banks' inventories consisted largely of cereals, carbonated beverages, candy, snacks, and other convenience foods; and low-income people seldom met the national goal of five servings a day of fresh fruits and vegetables. We were looking at a potential major public health intervention the likes of which academic researchers can only dream about.

We thought that by relying on our understanding of the diffusion of innovations, we could easily rescue Weiss's orphan from obscurity. In our hubris (and ignorance), we predicted confidently that to achieve success we would need to give only a year or so of our attention—part time at that—to leaders of food banks across the country, teaching them about produce collection and distribution.

Little did we suspect that our first adopting location would not launch its produce program until two years later (in 1993). Nor could we have imagined that we would still be turning food banks into produce distributors almost two decades later. We discovered that the diffusion of orphan innovations was anything but fast and obvious.

DISSEMINATION

Our first instinct was to hold an invited conference that would bring together the people and organizations required to set up produce recovery in several regions. By telephoning food banks

and sources in the produce wholesale industry, we identified five cities across America where people seemed ready to collaborate on setting up a donation and distribution system. With a grant from the Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, we invited potential partners to Los Angeles for two days of meetings. They saw Weiss's dock in action and quizzed him about its operations. A representative from Houston's program contributed his experiences. We wrote a detailed workbook describing the Los Angeles operation, including forms and legal documents. We organized the five cities' representatives into small-group discussions about the dissemination of innovations, including what makes the process challenging and, with care, successful. Participants drew up a checklist of actions to create produce programs in their cities. We promised to follow up with phone calls to keep track of progress and to offer timely encouragement, which we did.

One year later, none of these five cities had made convincing progress toward launching regular produce donations from wholesalers. From our repeated telephone inquiries we began to recognize our mistake: We were attempting to transplant a *copy* of the Los Angeles program. Instead, we should have been transplanting the *concept* of produce collection in whatever manner the local food bank could best use.

We had underestimated the importance of embracing variation in each site's geography, business culture, charitable infrastructure, and more. We discovered how quickly a workshop's atmosphere of enthusiasm and commitment could fade. We were forcibly reminded of how often information must be repeated and made salient before learning occurs. We also had not forecast the number of groups that must come together, gradually over time, to launch and sustain a social service program. In short, we had been technocrats; we lacked hands-on experience with the realities of the fresh produce industry and with local nonprofit food banks.

But how to provide a more individualized and knowledgeable approach? We began attending national and regional meetings of two organizations that encompassed the vast majority of local food distribution efforts: America's Second Harvest (with more than 200 food banks) and Foodchain, to which 127 prepared-and-perishable groups belonged. (Foodchain and Second Harvest subsequently merged, rebranding itself as Feeding America.) We made friends with the most progressive and forthcoming executive directors we could find and peppered them with questions about how they operated. We studied national directories of the produce industry, learning about suppliers in various cities and states.

Ultimately, we created a project called From the Wholesaler to the Hungry (FWH), based at Annenberg and the Keck School of Medicine. We distributed our contact information to food banks and invited members to phone or write us in order to explore possibilities of launching wholesale produce recovery efforts of their own.

Meanwhile, recognizing our underlying motivation to improve the health of low-income people, leaders of the national organizations began to offer us program slots where we could explain the value of fresh vegetables and fruits in diets. In our presentations, we urged executive directors to see that malnutrition and the prevention of chronic diseases are as important to their mission as hunger relief. We showed pictures of the achievements by Houston and Los

Angeles. Conversations at these national gatherings started to fan sparks of interest among executive directors. We followed up with each promising place, extending the following offer:

We will spend two days with you conducting a feasibility study. During that visit we will:

- a) Meet with you and your board to describe the costs and benefits of a produce program, on top of the packaged goods you already handle;
- b) Meet with as many of your organization's staff as possible, from warehouse to front office, to explain the challenges and advantages of handling fresh produce;
- c) Take you on exploratory meetings with three or four potential produce wholesale donors, to sample their willingness to get involved;
- d) Meet with some of your recipient agencies, to gauge their eagerness and apprehensions about getting fresh produce;
- e) Make presentations on your behalf to local foundations or significant philanthropic donors, if you wish;
- f) Visit local health authorities or political figures, if you wish;
- g) Have an exit conversation to review what we have learned;
- h) Within a week, send you a detailed report of our appraisal of whether a produce program can be successful in your locale, along with a checklist of near- and longer-term steps required for a pilot effort.

These services are free to you. At the conclusion of these exchanges, you may decide to move forward on produce collections, in which case we will continue to provide technical assistance and help develop financial support for incremental costs. Or you may decide that fresh produce is not in your organization's immediate future, and we will not contact you further.

One of the earliest food banks to accept our invitation was in Baltimore. Because a wholesale market in nearby Jessup, Md., figured to be an important supplier, we took Weiss along. He taught our hosts and us how to schmooze with dock owners and managers. The visit went as planned. The food bank's executive director seemed persuaded to launch a produce effort.

Still, weeks dragged by with no apparent progress and no convincing reasons for the delay. Finally, in frustration, we called the executive director. "We have a piece of good news," we lied. We said that one of our supporters had family ties to Baltimore and wanted to see the food bank distribute significant amounts of fresh produce, and that we had a check for \$1,000 to donate toward start-up costs. We said that if Baltimore was ready to establish a program in a serious way and on a regular basis, we would mail the check that day. (Actually this was our own money.) The food bank director fell silent, and then cleared his throat. "Send the check. We'll start within two weeks."

Baltimore kept its word. Within two years the food bank was handling more than 1 million pounds of fresh produce annually and continues to distribute growing amounts of these foods today. After two years of work we had logged our first adoption.

During the next months we traveled to other cities, and a trickle of organizations launched programs in Dallas, Kansas City, Chicago, and Seattle. Several developed novel methods for soliciting, aggregating, or distributing perishable food. We studied the most interesting variations and published a series of manuals for other cities to consult.

With a growing cadre of adopters, we began to assemble more persuasive presentations at national and regional meetings of food rescue organizations. We stopped lecturing and, instead, organized panels composed of successful produce programs. They provided authenticity,

pride, and vivid details we could never have matched. Within three years of starting our efforts we had nurtured 17 new programs.

Of course, problems arose. One program was up and running for a month when a call came in from an outraged food bank director. “I knew this would happen! I’ve got 5,000 pounds of rotten bananas on my dock. What do I do now?” A few calls revealed that, in fact, the food bank was the fortunate recipient of perfectly edible plantains, a staple in the Latin American diet and much prized by a sizable segment of the food bank’s clientele. Another day, a different food bank director had the cook of a battered women’s shelter call us to express her dismay. “I picked up 20 pounds of those ugly things that they called kiwi,” she said. “I boiled them. ... What do I do next?” These stories reminded us how novel fresh produce was to the world of food banking.

From the Baltimore experience we learned that early funding, even if modest, can tip the balance. In 1994 we met the philanthropist Helene Soref, who offered an extraordinary commitment out of the resources of the Samuel M. and Helene K. Soref Foundation. Whenever FWH had a food rescue organization poised on the brink of launching a pilot produce program, she would write the organization a check within 15 working days on the strength of our recommendation. This timely support, usually \$12,000 to \$20,000, was critical for nudging produce programs forward while enthusiasm was high. Eventually, 51 organizations benefited from one-time, but timely, Soref grants. These were used to hire an extra driver or a produce solicitor, lease a refrigerated truck, buy refrigerators for agencies, whatever was needed to get the program going. Waiting until the next fiscal year to budget for these expenses would sap a food bank’s leadership of enthusiasm for the project.

In 1997, Kraft Foods refocused its charitable giving to combat hunger and malnutrition and invited us to help the firm design what became known as the Community Nutrition Program. Kraft was willing to start a new series of grants to help grow programs that had at least a year of experience under their belts. We both agreed we needed to establish performance metrics. We set indicators such as growth in pounds of nutritious food collected, reduced discard, expansion of agencies that received perishables in addition to the usual inventory of foods, and coherence of operational plans for achieving targets and sustaining the program.

We managed Kraft’s grantmaking from 1997 to 2009, when the Community Nutrition Program closed its doors. In that period we recommended nearly 700 awards out of more than 1,100 proposals submitted. Kraft grants, totaling more than \$30 million, changed the norms for what food banks should be doing.

Produce programs are now more common than not. They reclaim more than 400 million pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables every year, a 25-fold increase since 1991. In many organizations, produce is now the largest category of food, outdistancing former food bank staples of carbonated beverages, snacks, and baked goods. Increasingly, food banks distribute fresh foods to their most distant agencies, such as remote rural churches, helping democratize access to nutrition.

CUSTOMIZATION, NOT REPLICATION

The most important lesson we have learned after 19 years of work is that it is not possible to simply replicate an innovation from one

location to another. Instead, one needs to customize the innovation for each particular site. To replicate is “to produce an identical version, repeatedly.” This aspiration has driven commercial franchising, a successful force in business because uniformity yields economies of scale, permits centralized marketing, and boosts profitability. Holiday Inn and McDonald’s used replication to muscle aside funky auto courts and burger stands.

Some proponents of social entrepreneurship have embraced replication. Our experience, however, led us increasingly in the direction of customization. Steps required to launch a produce program hinged on a wide variety of local conditions. To truly disseminate the innovation, rather than be frustrated by these variations, we had to embrace them.

Customizing also meant that we had to identify barriers to adoption at potential new sites. We found three mind-sets that discouraged adoption. First, food banks often felt embattled and defensive, believing that the general public was complacent about poverty, did not appreciate the food bank’s efforts, and would not provide the extra support needed to recover and distribute fresh produce. Second, they were poorly informed about the food industries on which they depended. They could not envision wholesale firms wanting to hand off perishable but commercially doomed goods early enough for nutritious consumption. Third, food banks routinely believed that most hungry people and the agencies that serve them were hooked on convenience food and would spurn fresh produce.

Once we identified these mind-sets, we could combat them. The food banks became more open to innovation after we were able to help them reposition their mission as soldiers in the war against chronic disease, which would win them more allies. We helped them learn about donors’ business models, including crucial junctures in product flow where offloading eventual surpluses to charitable solicitation would turn into financial benefits for the donor. Finally, our site visits brought food bank leadership directly to the front trenches with face-to-face meetings with agency volunteers and food recipients, who, without exception, chorused, “Please, get us more fresh foods.”

The process of customization is not easy, but it is essential for an innovation to be adopted in new locales. We drew eight lessons from our experience that can be used by others to spread innovations.

EIGHT LESSONS FOR CUSTOMIZING INNOVATIONS

1. Customizers must become informed about their innovation’s operating details and be recognized as people with ground-level knowledge. We had to acquire expertise about the operating details of food banks, the finances of food banks and donors, and the elements of the food chain from field to household. We needed to master arcane facts about temperature controls; specification and capabilities of trucks, forklifts, pallet jacks, and other equipment; charges levied by nearby landfills; and more. Only then could we offer intelligent solutions.

2. Customizers must learn about specific local conditions, welcome diverse scenarios, and develop a flexible repertoire of solutions for local needs and possibilities. Not only did we have to understand general operating details about food banks, we also had to learn the specific situation in each locale. Was there a

centralized wholesale produce market in that region? How widely dispersed were recipient agencies? Was there a need for additional cooling capacity at agencies and, if so, what stopgap measures might substitute? In the process of learning the answers to these questions, we actively gathered up variations on how the program might be implemented in different circumstances. We traveled to new cities, picking up ideas that food bankers had invented and sharing them wherever they might apply. We wrote and distributed (free of charge) technical manuals that documented solutions various food banks had invented.

3. Customizers must devote substantial time to their effort, including traveling to sites one by one and inventing ways for successful adopters of a social service to pollinate places that are undecided. Customizers must be patient, but monitor progress regularly. Customizers must accept that change might be measured over years, not weeks or months. We logged tens of thousands of miles visiting food banks. We also funded peer exchanges, sending operational staff from one food bank to visit counterparts in other areas of the country. We organized workshops at national and regional meetings of food banks, where experienced people from effective programs could tutor neophytes. We took savvy and personable food bankers with us when visiting locations that were considering the launch of their own produce programs. We praised incremental progress. Where a food bank failed to show interest, we waited for turnover in top leadership and tried again.

4. Customizers must identify barriers to adoption and sympathize with people's psychological mind-sets that prevent new ideas from taking root. We slowly recognized that food banks felt embattled, had preconceived and incorrect notions about how the produce industry operated, and held certain beliefs about how low-income people would approach fresh produce. Once we identified these mind-sets, we could actively counteract them, finding ways that opened people's minds to new ways of thinking.

5. Customizers need solid evidence about their innovation's worth: the value of the benefits, the singularity of their program for securing those benefits, and the leveraging of human and financial resources necessary to achieve success. When we talked with food banks we emphasized four facts—some of which weren't understood when the food banks started, or even as recently as the 1990s. First, we explained that a sound diet that includes plentiful vegetables and fruits is essential to prevent and manage many chronic diseases. Second, the cost of fresh produce in markets had skyrocketed compared to cost-of-living expenses, whereas snack foods and many beverages had actually become less expensive. Third, stores in low-income neighborhoods offer fewer nutritious foods, and of lower quality and at a higher price, than stores in middle-class neighborhoods. Finally, the majority of Americans who experience food insecurity are reached only by the emergency food network. Armed with these facts, food banks began to reimagine their central mission from hunger relief alone to disease prevention—a cosmic shift.

6. Customizers must find at least one strategically positioned person at each site to serve as their champion. Each adopting site moved forward on the energies of a single individual willing to take personal risks to make a produce program happen. These champions were good at building coalitions and wouldn't quit easily. We

maintained continuous contact with each site's champion to help propel the pilot program and solve operational glitches before they escalated into lethal flaws. Here again, organizations varied. Sometimes, a food bank's executive director stepped up to the plate, but we also found allies among subordinate staff members, wholesale donors or their spouses, and philanthropic contributors to the food bank—and elsewhere.

7. Customizers must have timely control of seed money that can help budding programs launch pilot efforts while enthusiasm is high. We learned that channeling small amounts of start-up money is preferable to making large grants. Modest seed money induces the recipient to make its own commitments that will lead to a sustained program.

8. Customizers must cede credit for successes to others and get out of the way as soon as programs are able to sustain themselves. For an innovation to take root, the new site and its leaders must own it. Otherwise, when the customizer leaves, there is no one to keep it alive. Success in disseminating a social innovation rises in direct proportion to the adopters' conviction that they are inventing the new program, instead of mimicking one that others have patented. Customizers must cede much of their authority in order to win eventual victory. We avoided the limelight, declining to attend grand openings, refusing to suggest names for produce programs, and acting bashful whenever someone thanked us for our help. We urged the food banks themselves to make critical decisions. Along the way, we gratefully received two commendations for our work (from the United States secretary of agriculture and the UPS Foundation), but we did not issue press releases trumpeting those developments.

CONCLUSION

The uneven distribution of social benefits may be partly due to inevitable lag times in spreading good ideas. We believe, however, that clumsy or weakhearted attempts at dissemination also have kept best practices from spreading.

The principal at Chicago's Providence-St. Mel said that the school's accomplishments "are not rocket science," but there is indeed a science behind transplanting innovations, one that can be learned partly from successful examples. Such learning will grow more likely where enthusiasts for social benefits recognize that creating social innovations and disseminating them call upon vastly different talents, and where the people who want to launch an innovation in a new location are fully prepared to customize it for the new locale—even, perhaps especially, when that means giving up the glory and the credit to achieve the greater goal.

Customization requires slogging labor and is more nuanced than replication, but it is often the only way that a successful but orphaned innovation can take root elsewhere. For us, putting in that extra effort has made all the difference. ■

Note

- 1 Throughout this article, we refer to food banks. We recognize that there are many food rescue organizations that do not call themselves food banks and are not affiliated with Feeding America. Some of these groups are gleaning organizations, or prepared-and-perishable food rescue organizations. In our work, we have helped all types of organizations (not just food banks) that collect and distribute fresh food to hungry people.