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Goodbye junk food, hello healthier snacks?

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By Jennifer Bain
Food Editor

No more knocking vending machines for being full of Kit Kats, Coca-Cola and bad-for-you snacks.

You can get a healthy vending machine for your school or office that's stocked with foods that are healthy, organic — or at least slightly better for you than conventional snacks.



Rory Stavro-Pearce, founder of Organic Vending, shows off some of the organic or natural snacks he stocks in the vending machine at Volkswagen Downtown Toronto.

ANDREW WALLACE/TORONTO STAR

Jeff Sutor, president of Brokerhouse Distributors in Rexdale, has quietly rolled out about 100 HealthyVendCanada machines across the country in the past three years.

"Initially it wasn't well-received and the product availability was scarce," he admits. "Now there are a lot more products that are easily purchased and easily vended, so it's picking up momentum."

"The landscape of vending is changing."

Visually, the HealthyVendCanada machine is an improvement over the drab, utilitarian

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machines that now dominate. It's covered in pictures of blue sky, green grass and happy children.

At [Brokerhouse](#) (which sells a spectrum of vending machines and the foods that go in them) a display model is full of V8 Splash, 2 per cent milk, bottled water, Thinsations, Nature Valley granola bars, Aunt Ethel's Youth Mix, and carrots and dip.

"Our industry has been unfairly stereotyped as the producer of all things bad," says Sutor, who has been in the business for 28 years. "Vending is really a form of retailing — it's nothing more than a filler of demand."

Traditionally, the demand was for unhealthy products. Now there's a small, but growing, desire for healthier options.

Some American states have passed laws controlling vending machines. In Iowa, which is waging war on childhood obesity with its Iowa Healthy Kids Act, [All Brands Vending Resource](#) has launched healthy vending machines.

The snacks and beverages in All Brands' machines must be low in fat, sugar and carbohydrates. They can't have synthetic ingredients, trans fats, artificial colours or artificial flavours.

Schools can buy All Brands machines, customize them in their colours and logos, control what goes into them, and keep the profits.

HealthyVendCanada offers similar options. Those who want vending machines to fundraise can buy a machine (for \$5,000 to \$10,000) and stock it themselves to maximize profits. Companies that simply want to offer food to employees can hire a vendor to stock a machine.

Sutor says one client is a major automotive manufacturer. For every 10 vending machines it has, one is devoted to healthy products. The YMCA recently asked for a proposal; so did a private school in Oakville.

Of course, you don't have to buy a branded HealthyVendCanada machine. You can ask the company that supplies your existing vending machines for a healthier product list.

Rory Stavro-Pearce, a former day trader who wanted to have a "green company," launched [Organic Vending](#) in January.

He found an adviser in New York, went to an organic and natural food expo in California, and began sourcing products.

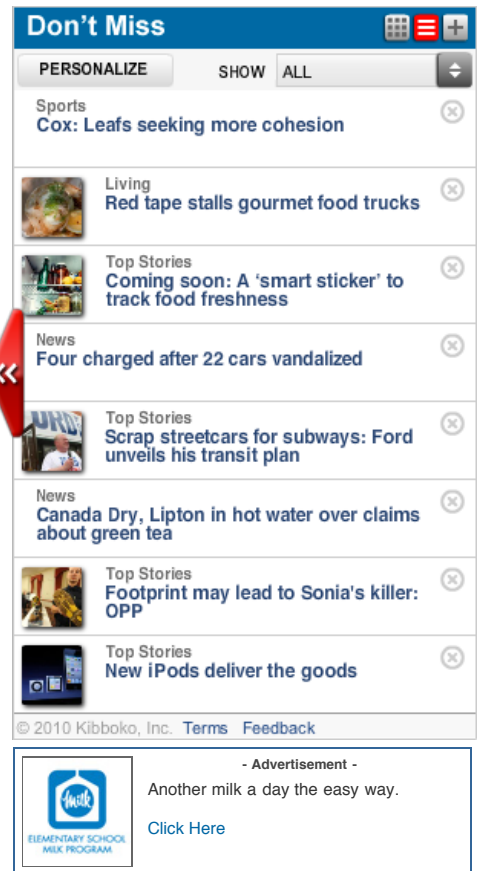
"I think the day of the Dorito may be a little bit limited because people want a healthy alternative," Stavro-Pearce says. "It's about finding things at a price point that people are willing to spend."

He hopes to tap into the school market, saying he has developed a product selection that beats the nutrition criteria set out by Ontario's [School Food and Beverage Policy](#) set to come into effect Sept. 1, 2011.

Of course, schools aren't the only clients for vending machines.

In April, Stavro-Pearce revamped the pop machine at Volkswagen Downtown Toronto, filling it mainly with organic or natural snacks like Kettle chips, Terra Exotic Vegetable Chips, Clif Bars, Luna Bars, Larabars and Black River orange juice. (A few old-school snacks remain, like Skittles, Aero chocolate bars and M&Ms.)

One of the factors that's helping vending machines to expand their culinary horizons is the



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fact that many are now refrigerated. New machines have touch screens instead of buttons, accept credit cards and have sensors that ensure you're not charged unless your item drops.

David Star of Vendables Vending Corp. has 300 machines in 120 locations around Greater Toronto and says "there's no limit to what you can offer" from refrigerated machines.

At Sunwing Travel in Mississauga, he's proud that he sells a \$5 Martha's Shake 'n Eat Salad and \$1.50 Jamaican beef patties freshly made from Non-Nisa bakery.

Still, when Kris Douglas comes by for a snack during his break, he chooses a Kit Kat. His wife always packs him a healthy lunch, but he has a weakness for chocolate.

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