



PRESENTS

# HOW TO START A MOBILE FOOD BUSINESS

A Step-by-Step  
Guide



## About This Guide

The most important aspect of having a mobile food business is finding a concept that is strong and clear. After you have determined that you are interested in being a mobile business, all of your efforts should be focused on refining your concept and determining the **what**, **who** and **where** of your business.

### Why Street Food?

The first step in launching a street food business is determining why you are interested in owning a mobile food business as opposed to all other types of businesses.

These reasons might include:

1. You are known for making a particular dish or cuisine really well
2. Low(er)-risk entry point into the marketplace
3. Opportunity to accumulate capital (\$) if you're interested in eventually opening a restaurant
4. Mobility
5. Flexible hours of operation

Like any type of business, mobile food comes with various challenges (space/equipment restrictions, weather susceptibility) and opportunities. It's important to weigh both while deciding if this is the right business model for you.

## What You Will Find In This Guide

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# Mobile Food Opportunities

There are two main types of permitting tracks available to mobile food facilities (MFFs). Each depends on the specific locations you are interested in, and offer various advantages and disadvantages. More specific information regarding the permitting process is available in the Permits section.

**Public Right of Way:** Most sidewalks and streets in San Francisco fall under the Department of Public Works' (DPW) public property permitting process (for a complete list of available locations, visit DPW's website). Before starting on the permit paperwork, you should spend a sufficient amount of time researching potential locations.

Look for things like foot traffic, nearby bathrooms, available parking for your food truck or trailer plus the truck that tows it, and restaurants within the area. Permit applications run the risk of being denied if they are protested on the basis of "like foods," which means any restaurant serving similar food can block your permit. For this reason, it is important to do the research beforehand and introduce yourself to the neighbors so that they can get to know you and offer support.

**Private Property:** On private property, the fees are up to the property owner; usually % of sales. To negotiate private locations, contact the property owner. As mentioned, parks in San Francisco are considered private property. Those run by the City of San Francisco are run by the Department of Rec & Parks through a public RFP process.

**Plus Fairs, Festivals and Events:** Special events (either one-off or recurring) can provide additional sources of revenue for your mobile business. The permit and application process may vary with each event, so be sure to check with the event organizer for specific details.

## Very Basically What You Will Need

- **An Idea:** All of this, of course, begins with an idea. What are you going to be selling, will you benefit from being mobile, who are your customers? If you have not written this process into your business plan, does it work with your business plan?
- **A Commissary (or 2):** All MFF's are required to use a commissary for food prep, food storage, parking, and daily up-keep. Different types of MFFs have different limitations, so you will need at least one commissary no matter what type of MFF you have. The Bay Area does not have many full service

commissaries. Many Trucks have 2-3 commissaries, depending on where they do service. Based on your MFF and menu it is important to identify what commissary needs you have.

- Commercial liability insurance.
- A Business License: As a seller, you are required to have a business license and a business name at the very least, as well as a seller's permit.
- Mobile Food Facility (MFF): You will need either a truck, trailer or cart to sell from. Each class of MFF varies in terms of type of equipment you can have, what types of foods you can prepare and cook, where you can park, and how much start-up and on-going capital you will need.
- A Location: Finally, you will need a place to set up this business. And that is where this guide begins!

## What Kind of Business Do You Want?

Some of the most successful street food concepts are ones that focus on making “one great thing.” That ‘thing’ can be a particular dish, ingredient, regional cuisine, food type, etc., but the point is that a mobile business greatly benefits from a clear, concise and focused idea. Because of the limitations of space and equipment, it will also ease your production system to limit the range of dishes you will need to serve.

Take a few weeks and visit other food trucks, trailers and carts as a consumer, especially those in the areas in which you want to sell. Ask yourself a set of questions that will allow you to assess how you think your product will sell from a mobile business. Very basically, the following list will give you an idea of the sorts of information that may prove useful:

### **I. Location?**

- a. What type of MFF is there space for at your desired location?
- b. How manageable is the load-in and load-out?
- c. Will you need to be located on the sidewalk or the street?
- d. How available is parking both for your truck and/or auxiliary vehicle?

### **II. What type of food do you plan on cooking?**

- a. Will products be served hot or cold?
- b. Where will the prep and cooking happen?
- c. Are products being served packaged or made-to-order?

### **III. Service and Cooking**

- a. How many people do you anticipate needing for this operation? Cooking? Taking Orders?
- b. How much storage, counter and cook space on the MFF would you need to make these products?

### **IV. Additional Factors**

- a. Do you have a vehicle that can tow a trailer? How much can it tow?

- b. Can you attach a trailer hitch to the vehicle?
- c. Have you identified a commissary to park your MFF? One for prep? Can you easily wash and drain your MFF at either of these?
- d. How much capital are you prepared to invest in the purchase of an MFF?

*Below you will find a worksheet designed to map these questions and their answers;*

*The ideal answer indicates, in your mind, what the perfect selling conditions would be. Your observation will then be placed next to this ideal, and you will have an opportunity to assess the realistic feasibility of this project.*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Ideal Answer</b>	<b>Observation</b>	<b>Relevance</b>	<b>Score (1-10)</b>
<b><i>Location</i></b>	<b>What would you like the answer to be?</b>	<b>What is your actual observation?</b>	<b>How important?</b>	
How much space is there for an MFF?				
Is loading manageable?				
Will you be on the sidewalk or street?				
Is parking available?				
<b><i>Products</i></b>				
What products do you plan to sell?				
Will they be served hot or cold?				
Will you prep and/or cook on the MFF?				
Will the products be served packaged or made to order?				
<b><i>Staffing</i></b>				
How many staff will you need for cooking/prep? For taking orders?				

How much storage space will you need?				
How much prep space?				
<b>Additional Factors</b>				
Do you have a vehicle that can tow a trailer? How much can it tow?				
Can you attach a trailer to this vehicle? Does it have a hitch?				
Do you know of a prep commissary where you can easily load your MFF?				
Do you know of a commissary where you can park your MFF?				
<b>TOTAL</b>				

## Target Market & Locations

Where you sell is a crucial factor in planning your mobile food business. One of your biggest assets is your mobility, but you want to make sure that all of the locations you choose are in line with your target market, and offer enough opportunity for sales on a regular basis. By doing sufficient research beforehand, you can determine what sort of schedule and potential locations makes the most sense for your business.

Visit other food trucks, trailers and carts in the areas in which you want to sell. Ask yourself a set of questions that will allow you to assess how you think your product will sell in these areas, and how sales are affected by weather. Very basically, the following list will give you an idea of the sorts of information that may prove useful:

- I. **What are the hours of the MFF?**
  - a. When is it busiest/slowest?
  - b. What time do the vendors show up/break down?
- II. **How busy is the MFF?**
  - a. Is it consistent or seasonal?
  - b. Is it affected by the weather?

- c. Are the consumers there by chance, or as a destination?
- d. Is there a lot of foot traffic?

### III. Vendor Competition

- a. Is someone else selling something similar to your product, either other MFFs or brick and mortars?
- b. Does there seem to be room in the area for your product?

### IV. Consumer Base

- a. Who are the customers around the area?
- b. What are they spending their money on?
- c. Is there expendable income?
- d. Do the customers match your target clientele? Will there be demand for your product?

### V. Technical Details

- a. Is parking available?
- b. Trash? Bathrooms?
- c. Is it located on private or public space?
- d. Is it easily accessible both for you and your customers?

*Below you will find a worksheet designed to map these questions and their answers;*

*The ideal answer indicates, in your mind, what the perfect selling conditions would be. Your observation will then be placed next to this ideal, and you will have an opportunity to assess the realistic feasibility of this project.*

Question	Ideal Answer	Observation	Relevance	Score (1-10)
<b>Hours</b>	<b>What would you like the answer to be?</b>	<b>What is your actual observation?</b>	<b>How important?</b>	
What are the busiest hours?				
What are the slowest hours?				
When do the vendors show up/break down?				
<b>Occupancy</b>				
Consistent or seasonal?				
Weather based? (Is it covered or open? Sunny or shaded?)				
<b>Competition</b>				

Is there any product similar to yours?				
Is there physical space for you in the market?				
<b>Consumers</b>				
What are the customers like? Do they match your target customer profile?				
What do they spend their money on? Are they there to eat, or just browsing?				
Is there expendable income?				
<b>Technical Details</b>				
Is there parking?				
Is it on public or private land?				
Is it easily accessible?				
Is there trash/bathrooms nearby?				
<b>TOTAL</b>				

## What You Should Know About Costs

While mobile food facilities do offer a lower-capital opportunity than brick and mortars to gain new access to markets, they are not without their costs and risks. Every business idea will require a facility that is appropriate for the needs and priorities you have outlined, but in your planning you should think carefully about what your costs will be so that you can minimize them, set realistic prices and determine potential locations based on projected sales. This section will give you a general outline of the sorts of costs this model may encounter.

### Equipment Costs

- I. **MFF:** The previous exercises are intended to assist you in determining what class of MFF you'll need. In addition to taking into consideration the variety of permit costs associated with each class, you should also consider the capital investment each requires in terms of equipment.
  - a. Average Costs:
    - i. Push-Cart – New: \$2,000-\$5,000
    - ii. Trailer – Unenclosed: \$7,000-\$20,000, Enclosed: \$30,000+
    - iii. Truck – Used: approx. \$30,000+; Custom: approx. \$60,000+
  - b. Some manufacturers:
    - i. MSM Catering, Los Angeles (Custom trucks, some trailers)
    - ii. US Catering Truck Manufacturing, Hayward (Custom trailers & trucks)
    - iii. Metal Gourmet, San Jose (Custom trailers & pushcarts)
    - iv. Craigslist, eBay, etc.
- II. **Wrap:** All MFFs also need signage or branding of some sort. Many vendors opt for a vinyl wrap, either full wrap or decals. This typically costs around \$10/sq ft. An old school paint job is also an option, though more costly and less forgiving. Whatever method, remember that the MFF is essentially a mobile billboard for your business: the design should clearly reflect your brand and concept. The signage must include the business name, address, and telephone number in typeface at least 3 inches high and 3/8 inches thick (per SF Health Department).
  - a. Check out Custom Vehicle Wraps ([www.customvehiclewraps.com](http://www.customvehiclewraps.com)) and Arc Printing, among others, for vinyl wraps.
- III. **Transportation;** vendors will need to keep in mind that if opting for a trailer or cart, you will need a vehicle and hitch, with enough capacity to tow it. These costs also include gas and generator fuel.
- IV. **Storage;** you are legally required to park your MFF in a secured location- a parking commissary. The Health Department may be able to suggest some recommended commissaries, but some options include:
  - a. Army Street Storage (SF); Affordable Storage (SF), Public Storage (throughout the Bay Area)
- V. **Labor;** Keep in mind that you may not be able to work your truck or trailer alone, in particular if you are cooking or prepping on-site. Factor in your labor costs when considering an MFF. Think about roles as well. Who will be doing what? When will you give them their job description?

- VI. **Permits**; The permitting process will vary based on the county, the event itself, and the vendor. You will find a chart for permitting costs in the chapter on permits and throughout the appendices.
- VII. **Proper Signage (Menus)**; Beyond the initial sign stating your business name you will need to present signs that list your menu items clearly and visibly, though you may choose to include this in the wrap itself.

*You can use this worksheet to estimate your start-up costs. Use the first column (your cost) to calculate total cost, then divide that by the days of the month.*

Item	Average (estimated) Cost	Your Cost	Cost per Day?
<b>MFF</b>	Approx. \$7-40,000 (See Equipment Costs section)		
<b>Wrap</b>	\$2500 (\$10/sq ft)		
<b>Additional Costs</b>			
<b>Trailer Hitch</b>	\$300		
<b>Tables, Small Wares, etc.</b>	\$500		
<b>Menus</b>	\$200		
<b>Transportation (Fuel/Gas)</b>	\$800/month		
<b>Kitchen Rental</b>	approx. \$650		
<b>Storage</b>	\$1000/ month		
<b>Labor</b>	\$10.24/per hour x # of hours		
<b>Permits</b>	See permit sheet		
<b>TOTAL</b>			

# Permits

## What You Will Need to Operate

As previously stated, the specific permits you will need are determined by the location(s) you have chosen for your MFF (see Appendix A). At the end of this section you will find a worksheet that will give you a start in understanding the permit process here in San Francisco. It is important to keep in mind that permits are different in every county, and every vendor should research the necessary permits before investing too heavily in their location. MFF permitting can be a long and costly process; it is also important to weigh the complexity, as well as costs, of the permitting process with the risks and opportunities you have identified for each location.

### **San Francisco Department of Public Health**

The SF DPH outlines two distinct permitting processes determined by whether you intend to locate your MFF on public or private property. Regulations (and rates) within these two processes also vary based on the type of MFF (see Appendices A-D). Some of the information is available along with this packet, but there are many more resources available on their website below.

Contact: Environmental Health  
San Francisco Department of Public Health  
1390 Market Street, Suite 210  
San Francisco, CA 94607  
(415) 252-3825  
<http://www.sfdph.org/dph/eh/Food/mobile.asp>

MFF Program Contact: Imelda Reyes (415)252-3825

Temporary Events Coordinator: Alicia Saam (415) 252-3811

### **\*\*State Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) Certification and Insignia**

Needed only for enclosed trailers or trucks. HCD is located in Sacramento; if you're buying used, it may already be inspected.

### **San Francisco Fire Department**

Prior to DPH approval, your MFF must be approved and permitted by SFFD. Just take your MFF to headquarters, and don't forget an approved fire extinguisher! Appointments are not necessary, but we suggest phoning ahead to make sure that an inspector will be available around that time.

Contact: San Francisco Fire Department  
698 Second Street  
San Francisco, CA 94107  
(415) 558-3303  
[www.sfgov.org/site/fire\\_index.asp?id=4460](http://www.sfgov.org/site/fire_index.asp?id=4460)

### **San Francisco Department of Public Works**

The San Francisco DPW is responsible for all permits related to cart vending on public right of way. Permits can be taken out for up to 7 locations, and the process involves notification of all businesses and residents within 300 ft of the proposed location(s). Citizens have the opportunity to contest the permit on the basis of "like foods," meaning there is similar food being sold within the vicinity.

Contact: Bureau of Street-Use and Mapping  
875 Stevenson Street, Room 460  
San Francisco, CA 94102  
415-554-5810  
<http://www.sfdpw.org/index.aspx?page=1376>

### **San Francisco Planning Department**

A Temporary Use Authorization (TUA) is necessary for MFFs located on private property, prior to obtaining DPH approval. You will need to list your proposed hours and location, along with the property owner's consent.

Contact: San Francisco Planning Department  
Planning Information Center  
1660 Mission St.  
San Francisco, CA  
(415)558-6377

<http://www.sf-planning.org/index.aspx?page=2846>

MFF Type	DPH Permit	SFFD Permit	Planning Permit (Private Only)	DPW Permit (Public Only)
MFF1	Plan Check=\$271.50 Annual License=\$181	Annual fee of \$330	Temporary Use Permit- \$417 (one-time fee, per location)	Filing Fee=\$125 Notification Fee=\$200 Inspection Fee=\$383 (\$714 total for first location)
MFF2	Plan Check=\$452.50 Annual License=\$271	Annual fee of \$330	Temporary Use Permit- \$417	Filing Fee=\$125 Notification Fee=\$200 Inspection Fee=\$383 (\$714 total for first location)
MFF3	Plan Check=\$452.50 Annual License=\$271	Annual fee of \$330	Temporary Use Permit- \$417	Filing Fee=\$125 Notification Fee=\$200 Inspection Fee=\$383 (\$714 total for first location)
MFF4	Plan Check=\$663.50 Annual License=\$724	Annual fee of \$330	Temporary Use Permit- \$417	Filing Fee=\$125 Notification Fee=\$200 Inspection Fee=\$383 (\$714 total for first location)
MFF5	Plan Check=\$663.50 Annual License=\$724	Annual fee of \$330	Temporary Use Permit- \$417	Filing Fee=\$125 Notification Fee=\$200 Inspection Fee=\$383 (\$714 total for first location)

## Setting-Up Shop

**Your MFF:** Every mobile business begins with a truck, trailer or cart. The structure itself is merely a shell- what's important is how you outfit the equipment inside and design the exterior.

### Outside the MFF:

#### **Wrap**

As discussed above, how you decorate your MFF is essential- it is the most prominent piece of marketing that people will see. In your sign you want to make clear what the food is that you are offering and you want to draw people in. Think about the placement of additional signs, patterns, colors and so forth.

#### **Menu**

Your menu is your first point of contact with consumers, and *the* opportunity to convince your customers to eat your food. For MFFs your menu should be concise, consciously priced and well-organized. Menus should be clear about everything that comes with your food, the portion size and the price. In a busy

situation you want to minimize the inessential and potentially time-consuming details. Mobile food businesses benefit most from having a simple, concise menu that clearly conveys your concept. Businesses with menus that are too extensive or that don't tie into their concept, might get lost.

## **Tables**

You may need to reorganize your service lines depending on how busy you are; for trucks and enclosed trailers, that may mean pulling your cashier and/or order-taker out of the MFF and using the service window for handing in tickets, and passing out orders. You may also need to keep utensils, napkins and serve beverages from outside as well.

## **Inside the MFF:**

### **Equipment**

Once you have an idea of what you want to make, you can begin to plan out what sort of equipment you will need and how it will all fit together. The more streamlined the menu, the easier it will be, as you will only have to worry about working a couple pieces of equipment at one time.

*Service Window:* It's important to consider in a trailer or truck how the production will flow. Where orders come in, how that information is transferred to the line, where things are cooked, plated, then passed out to customers. As we've stressed, space restrictions make it essential to have a menu where you are working off of only a couple pieces of cooking equipment.

*Prep Table:* We will talk about mis-en-place (where things go) below, but think carefully about your prep area(s). At a busy moment it is this area that will be hit the hardest in terms of disintegration. Plan accordingly.

*Miscellaneous:* Storage inside the MFF will facilitate the organization and flow of day-to-day operations. But don't forget that the space is mobile, so be sure that things are secured or easily transportable.

### **Mis-en-Place**

Mis-en-place is a fancy French word that, essentially, means where things go. It is the concept that a cook can have things in order. Cooking is, at its heart, a messy science filled with unpredictability. Mis-en-place is the effort to harness and organize that essential disorganization to minimize the impact of high-pressure cooking as much as possible. Thinking hard about where things should go, in order to facilitate movement in a small-space, in order to shorten prep times, and so forth will help a business tremendously. The more you think about these moments ahead of time, the easier your job will be when it matters the most.

### **Cash Register/POS**

Think carefully about this most important piece of equipment. Choose a place to put your money where it is easily accessible, easily organized and safe. It can be a lockbox, an electronic machine, or a belt that you wear. The more organized your cash register is, the less likely you are to make the simple mistake of giving someone the wrong change, or misplacing your money. When you begin your day, count the money in your register, and do what you can to make sure that you begin everyday with plenty of change; \$1s, \$5s, and coins. Many companies like Square and TapViva now offer iPad or tablet compatible POS systems, which allow you to accept credit card transactions.

### **Social Media**

This is an important aspect of running a successful street food business; if you're not already comfortable with Facebook or Twitter, now's the time to start! Many organizations, including La Cocina, offer social media workshops various times throughout the year.

## **MFF Set-Up**

Use this space to sketch out what you think your MFF might look like. Be as detailed as possible in the space provided.

Remember to include your cooking equipment, your staff, and so forth. Also use the attached Appendix I to sketch out where you would like your MFF to be located (this is for public property).

## Taking it Step-By-Step: A Timeline

This is your chance to start planning, one of the most important parts of your business. Like mis-en-place, a well-written and organized timeline will let you worry about the most important and unpredictable things when they come, while having the most predictable taken care of in advance. Begin with your projected start date, and then work backwards, conscious of when you should have things done. The more time you give yourself, the better.

Projected Start Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### **3 or More Months Before:**

- 1) Write out your idea succinctly.
- 2) Develop and design your menu, with pricing.
- 3) Analyze your costs and the project's feasibility
- 4) Design your MFF set-up. Be as detailed as possible.

### **2 or More Months Before**

- 5) Begin search for funding
- 6) Begin to look for either pre-made MFFs, or begin conversations with manufacturers for a custom MFF
- 7) Begin acquiring your permits; go through a plan check with DPH to confirm

### **1 or More Months Before**

- 8) Finalize permits
- 9) Find and secure additional labor
- 10) Begin trailer wrap design and installation

### **3 Weeks Before**

- 11) Finalize and print additional menus and signs
- 12) Review site-specific requirements
- 13) Develop marketing/social media strategy

### **2 Weeks Before**

- 14) Set-up your MFF a few times, as practice, including load in and transit
- 15) Cook everything once from your menu, to understand timing

### **1 Week Before**

- 16) Prepare all food for soft-opening
- 17) Create your own timeline for the coming week
- 18) Go to the bank and get \$ for register

### **1 Day Before**

- 19) Pack as much as possible the day ahead of time
- 20) Check all equipment and supplies

### **3 Hours Before**

- 21) Pack equipment and leave for site

### **2 Hours Before**

- 22) Arrive, unpack and set-up (MFF, counter, equipment)

### **1 Hour Before**

- 23) Finalize set-up, review the ordering process, signs, etc.

### **30 Minutes Before**

- 24) At this point everything should be ready. Relax and good luck.

**Completed?**

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