

# The Market Entry Fund

## 2026 CO-RETAIL INTERGRATION GRANT PROGRAM APPLICATION GUIDE & QUESTIONS

### SECTION 1: ABOUT TMEF AND THIS PROGRAM

**Who We Are:** The Market Entry Fund (TMEF) is a Minnesota nonprofit that supports early-stage packaged food businesses. Our mission is to help build a more inclusive local food economy by supporting entrepreneurs as they grow their products, businesses, and market access.

Through our work, we help food makers access early funding, business support, operational guidance, and connections to first markets. We've learned that one of the biggest challenges for emerging food makers is getting products onto store shelves—and staying there. Without consistent access to retail, many promising businesses struggle to grow, even with a strong product.

Independently owned, specialty grocery stores and smaller food retailers are often best positioned to change this. They operate close to their communities and can work more directly and flexibly with small food makers and businesses.

**Why this Program:** This grant program was created in response to that need. The Co-Retail Grant Program supports independent grocery and specialty food retailers in Minnesota that want to strengthen how they source, promote, and sell products from emerging local food makers.

The goal is to help retailers build the space, systems, and support needed to make co-retail part of their everyday operations—creating stronger connections between makers, retailer, and customer.

**What is Co-Retail:** Co-retail (short for community retail) is a specific retail approach developed and used by TMEF's partner, Seasoned Specialty Food Market in St. Paul since 2017. It acts as an early-stage pathway—similar to an incubator—helping local food makers get their products onto store shelves through partnership with independent retailers. In this model:

- Retailers bring in products from local MN food makers
- Retailers provide shelf space, promotion, and in-store support
- Products are sold as part of the store's regular operations
- Makers receive a high share of the product sales—up to 100% in early stages

Depending on the size of the store, co-retail can be used as the main operating model for the entire store, but it most often works best as a defined offering (or program) within a store's existing business model—applied to select products or makers and managed under unique terms within the store.

This model reduces barriers for early-stage businesses while creating a more direct, locally rooted retail experience. For retailers, it can strengthen product mix, deepen customer connection, and create a more dynamic in-store experience that reflects their local community.

## SECTION 2: PROGRAM DETAILS & HOW TO APPLY

### Grant Amount & Timeline:

- Grant award: Typically \$10,000 – \$20,000
- Grant period: 6-12 months to use funds

### Est. Process Timeline

- Application Opens: April 15<sup>th</sup>
- Application Closes: June 4<sup>th</sup>
- Review Period: June-July
- Awards Announced: July
- Grant Payments: August & October
- Grantee Group Planning Meetings (3 Virtual Mtgs): August - September
- Co-Retail In-Store Launch: October
- TA & Support for Implementation: October – March 2027

**Who Can Apply:** You may apply if you meet the following basic qualifications. Only applicants who meet these requirements will be considered. That said, this is a competitive, specialized funding program, and we encourage you to review what we look for in competitive applicants beyond the basic qualifications.

### Basic Qualifications (must meet all):

- Operate a grocery or specialty food retail store in Minnesota
- Have been in business for at least 1 year
- Have clear ownership or decision-making authority

Competitive Applicants: In addition to meeting the above basic qualifications, the most competitive applicants will likely be those that align with the following:

- Independently owned stores that are primarily focused on selling packaged food products made by other makers or producers.
- Interested in working with Minnesota food makers—particularly those with less access to retail—and open to learning how to do this well.
- Demonstrate alignment with co-retail values—*building an inclusive, stronger local food system*, by *helping early-stage food businesses* access shelf space, integrating their products into regular operations, and *returning up to 100% of sales proceeds to makers* (a key element of co-retail).
- Adaptable and willing to make practical changes within their existing store to support co-retail

**How Funds Can Be Used:** Funds should support real, operational changes that help you integrate co-retail into your store. Examples include, but are not limited to the following:

- Improve product sourcing channels and engagement with local makers
- Add or upgrade inventory tracking and POS/vendor payment systems, including technology that supports co-retail and strengthen overall existing operations
- Purchase merchandising or storage equipment for co-retail products
- Make small physical upgrades to create space and shelving for co-retail products
- Branding, marketing, or customer education
- Short-term staffing to support co-retail integration

Funds are not intended for general store operations, such as rent or mortgage, ongoing general staffing, general inventory not tied to co-retail, or opening a new store. It is also not intended to replace lost revenue or cover shortfalls in sales, but to support forward-looking changes through integrating the co-retail model.

**Additional Requirements:** Please submit only one application, even if you operate multiple locations. Businesses that have previously received funding from TMEF—regardless of program—must wait at least two years before applying again. Finally, additional documentation may be requested from selected applicants before final decisions are made and funds are distributed.

**How Applicants Are Reviewed:** Applications are reviewed by a committee with experience across small business, food and agriculture, retail operations, and other relevant backgrounds. The committee will make a recommendation to the TMEF Board, who will make the final approval on funding.

### **SECTION 3: THE APPLICATION QUESTIONS**

*Before You Apply:* The application is completed through a Google Form. We recommend reviewing the questions below ahead of time and preparing your responses in advance.

*Help with Your Application:* We encourage you to join the information session before starting. Office hours are also available for anyone who would like a consultation with staff. Go to [www.marketentryfund.org](http://www.marketentryfund.org) for details and sign up. Availability is limited. Sign up in advance. Questions may also be emailed to [info@marketentryfund.org](mailto:info@marketentryfund.org).

*Disclaimer:* Submitting an application does not guarantee funding. TMEF reserves the right to modify or cancel this program at any time. All costs associated with preparing and submitting an application are the responsibility of the applicant.

#### **PART I: BUSINESS CONTACT**

Business Legal Name  
Mailing Address (Street, City, Zip Code)  
Name of Founder(s)/Owner(s)  
Primary Phone Number  
Primary Email Address

#### **PART II: BUSINESS INFORMATION**

\*Business EIN Number  
\*What type of Food License do you have?  
\*What is the food license number?  
\*Which agency issued this license? (e.g., MDA, MDH, etc.).  
\*Does your store hold any other licenses? If yes, list the license name(s), number(s), issuing agency  
\*Demographics (Race/Ethnicity) – select all that apply  
\*Is your business woman-owned? *Yes 50% or more | No*  
\*Number of Employees and Number of Years in Business  
\*What is your reported gross sales revenue last year?  
\*What is your average annual gross sales over the past 3 years? Please include both total sales (\$) and average units sold per year, and other helpful notes.  
\*Is your business currently (and generally) profitable? *Answer Yes or No, and briefly describe your answer. This helps us understand your business stability. Being profitable doesn't count against your application.*

### **PART III: GRANT REQUEST AMOUNT**

How much are you asking for? Applicants may request up to \$20,000.

### **PART IV: GRANT REQUEST NARRATIVE**

There are four narrative questions. Your responses help us assess the best fit with this grant and its objectives. Clear, thoughtful, and relevant responses will strengthen your application.

#### **Question 1: About Your Store/Retail Business** (Word Count: 4000 characters)

Tell us about your grocery or food retail store. Share what you think we should know and be sure to include the following. Please keep responses brief and balanced across all sections. Bullet points are welcome.

A) Overview: When did your store open, and why did you start the business? Briefly describe your store, including size (space), number of employees, product volume, and customer traffic.

B) Products and Makers: What products do you sell? Where do they come from, and who are your suppliers or makers (approximately how many)? How do you typically work with or engage these makers?

C) Customers: Who are your customers? If known, what percentage are repeat vs. new customers? How do customers typically hear about your store? How do you engage with them?

D) Strengths & Opportunities: Across all areas above, briefly share what is working well today and where you see opportunities for growth or improvement in the coming year.

E) Vision: What is your longer-term vision or goal for your store?

#### **Question 2: Alignment with Co-Retail Values** (Word Count: 4000 characters)

Why are you interested in co-retail, and how does your store align with the co-retail model? Describe:

- Why this approach matters to you and your store
- What you are already doing that reflects co-retail values
- What you would need to add or change in the next 3–6 months
- Why you believe your approach will work

#### **Question 3: Use of the Requested Funds** (Word Count: 4000 characters)

How would you use the requested funds to integrate co-retail into your store? Please include:

- What you would invest in and why (focus on your top 2–3 priorities)
- A brief estimate of how the funds would be allocated (e.g., % or dollar amounts)
- What success would look like (expected outcomes or changes)

#### **Question 4: Beyond the Grant** (Word Count: 3000 characters)

How will you continue co-retail in your store after the grant period? Please describe:

- Your plan to continue and grow co-retail over time and why do you believe your plan will work.
- What challenges you expect to face, and what support might you need to sustain this work.

**FINAL CONFIRMATION & SUBMISSION: Thank you for your interest.** By submitting this application, you confirm that the information provided is accurate to the best of your knowledge. *(Signature required)*.