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GRAB-AND-GO

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TARGETING TIME STARVED HUNGRY SHOPPERS

Grab-and-go foods provide the perfect antidote
By Carol Bareuther

Time-starved shoppers hungry for a meal or snack are increasingly looking to the supermarket deli for their grab-and-go food needs. In fact, the number of fast food purchases made at retail per customer between March and June 2015 was more than six visits higher than those to quick serve restaurants (QSR) in an average 4-week period, according to data from the Port Washington, NY-headquartered NPD Group's QSR Plus Retail Market Monitor.

"Deli operators have started to realize they are competing with restaurants.

Consequently, there has been a tremendous uptick in prepared foods in the deli. It's all about capturing customers' share of stomach," says Bob Sewall, executive vice president of sales and marketing at soup and side manufacturer, Blount Fine Foods, in Fall River, MA.

By offering easy-to-grab fresh flavorful foods in handy to-go packaging in a destination setting, deli operators can satisfy a consumer's craving for convenience. This fits the bill for the mother who wants a one-stop shop for staples and the family's dinner at the same time, the worker who prefers a speedy lunch to sit-down restau-

rant fare and those who like to dashboard dine on snacks throughout the day.

Health and freshness are two big trends driving what customers are looking for in grab-and-go deli foods.

"Deli shoppers seek healthy alternatives to QSR offerings, which often allows for differentiation from the fast-food options in the area," says Jonathan Whalley, education coordinator for the Madison, WI-headquartered International Dairy-Deli-Bakery Association (IDDBA).

This translates to greater transparency on the source and quality of ingredients, such as offerings with 'clean labels' or

labels that read like a recipe rather than a chemist's formula.

"We're seeing customers' desire to eat better in two main ways. First, they want products with a clean label. In other words, real dairy and real clams in items like New England Clam Chowder. Secondly, there's greater interest in organics, gluten-free and antibiotic free. Upgrading menus has been a trend in foodservice and now customers want it at retail," explains Blount's Sewall.

The desire for freshness is equally paramount.

"No longer are shoppers willing to settle for a sandwich that's sat in the chiller for two days," says Steve Olk, category manager for Planglow USA, a label and compostable packaging manufacturer based in West St. Paul, MN. "All age groups, from Millennials to Baby Boomers, and all income demographics are looking for that signage or sticker that says 'made fresh today.' Customers are willing to pay more for this higher quality experience."

Food Fast, Not Fast Food

The components of a register ringing up a grab-and-go program start with the food.

"The street food movement is creating grab-and-go opportunities that we haven't necessarily seen in the past. For example, dishes like fresh hot Asian noodles, Middle Eastern, Korean and Vietnamese cuisines are all gaining a foothold. Where traditional sandwiches and pizza once dominated the case, in the future we could see more items like the Banh Mi (a Vietnamese meat, poultry or pork filled sandwich with fresh and pickled veggies served on a French-style baguette) gain in popularity," says Olk.

Perennially favorite grab-and-go fare like soups as well as family-style sides to accompany rotisserie chicken programs remain best sellers.

"There's been a big boom in soups over the past 8 to 10 years. For example, white tablecloth restaurant chains like the Capital Grille have increased the number of soup offerings. Many restaurateurs are beefing up soups in favor of smaller portions of protein. In fact, diners today are starting to think of soups accompanied by bread, salads or sandwiches as not only lunch fare but also as a satisfying dinner that is healthy and priced at a fraction of the cost of, for example, a large steak," says Blount's Sewall.

Nearly half (46 percent) of consumers strongly agree that they visit certain restaurants specifically because they enjoy



PHOTO COURTESY OF PLACON

the soup, according to the *Left Side of the Menu: Soup and Salad Consumer Trend Report*, published by Chicago-based Technomic Inc., in 2014.

"New England Clam Chowder, Roasted Tomato Bisque, Cheddar and Broccoli and Classic Vegetable Beef with Barley Soup are staple sellers," says Mary Shepard, national sales manager at Fortun's Finishing Touch Sauces, a sauce and soup manufacturer in Kirkland, WA. The company sells its soup line in a retail pouch packed in a tub that is ready to heat-and-eat after the addition of milk or water. Each pouch makes 1 to 2 servings. Four-quart quantities are available to deli operators who have hot to-go kettle soups.

The Technomic report offers two other key facts for deli operators who want to take a bite out of foodservice soup sales. That is, 50 percent of consumers want to try new and unique soups. Plus, ethnic and innovative soups, such as Asian-style ramen and chilled varieties, are poised for growth, particularly among younger consumers.

"Traditional soups remain best-sellers, but we're seeing more interest in trendy ingredients. For example, we have a Chicken, Kale and Sweet Potato Soup. One of our new flavors is Roasted Red Pepper & Smoked Gouda. Another is our Margherita Pizza soup, which is made with real tomatoes, fresh basil and Mozzarella. This year, we'll be launching Caldo Verde, a seafood version of Portuguese Kale, Potato and Chorizo soup," says Blount's Sewall.

Last October, Blount launched a line

of side dishes that are designed to be merchandised alongside rotisserie chicken and other pre-prepared center-plate proteins. Selections include family-favorites like macaroni and cheese and loaded mashed potatoes, upscale flavors like chipotle smashed sweet potatoes and organic creamed kale and spinach.

BD&K Foods now offers its Fixin's, ready-to-serve side dishes with a southern twist, as an ideal complement to rotisserie chicken.

"Half of our products such as collard greens, butter beans, okra and tomatoes and field peas and snaps are favorites in the South. The other half are ones everybody loves like kernel corn, macaroni and cheese, smashed potatoes and green beans with potatoes," says Kevin Jordan, president and co-owner of the Columbus, GA-headquartered provider of premium fully-prepared, southern-style vegetables.

The sides come in 1-pound handled pouch bags that deli operators heat in a steamer and then display next to chicken in the hot case at dinnertime.

Grab-and-go eating is no longer limited to certain times of the day.

"Traditional meal time has been replaced by snacking at any time of the day or night. Good quality and convenient food offerings eaten at home, at the office or on the go will continue to expand," says Marilyn Stapleton, director of marketing for Anchor Packaging, in Ballwin, MO.

Half of all eating occasions are snacks, according to the IDDBA's October 2015-released, *Snacking Opportunities: Building Better Snacks*. What's more,



PHOTO COURTESY OF ANCHOR PACKAGING

this report reveals that 61 percent of people surveyed opted for healthier snacks, 53 percent chose smaller portions and 47 percent said they enjoyed anything new and different.

"Being on the go or in a hurry doesn't mean junk food is the only option," says Lori Bigras, senior marketing manager for Green Giant Fresh, managed by Growers Marketing, LLC, in Salinas, CA. "Green Giant grab-and-go Hummus Snack Cups will add flavor, as well as nutrition, to your customer's snacks and lunches."

The 2.5-ounce cups are sold four to a box and available in two flavors, Classic and Roasted Red Bell Pepper. They can be merchandised with other dips, salsas and spreads, or included in the deli's own cut vegetable cups or trays.

Olives are also gaining traction for snacking.

"Our most popular grab-and-go olives are our pre-packs. These include everything from an Olive Medley to Tropical Olives," says Patty Amato, director of sales for Farm Ridge Foods, in Islandia, NY, which manufactures and markets these items through its Olive Branch division.

Pack-To-Go

A profitable grab-and-go program is as much about the packaging as it is the food.

"Deli operators and manufacturers require packaging that fits all of their functional criteria but offers features that add additional benefits or may be a little unique or novel in approach to garner consumer attention," says Jeff Lucash, vice president of sales for Placon, a Madison, WI-based plastic packaging maker. "For salads, for

example, we're not just seeing traditional veggies, cheese and croutons for toppings, we're seeing a wider variety of topping combinations to pull consumers away from quick service, fast casual and traditional dining options."

The company's newest thermoformed plastic product lines, GoCubes and Selectables, allow customization of salads through the use of single or divided insert trays for toppings. These inserts enable both wet and dry toppings to be separated from each other but combined in a single container that allows food to stay fresh and crisp.

Lucash says one of its innovative customers puts Bibb lettuce in the base and then buffalo chicken, diced tomatoes and avocado in the insert for merchandising a 'make your own buffalo chicken wrap' meal. Both containers can be used with or without the insert trays for even more versatility. For example, GoCubes has a universal lid and when used without the insert, can be utilized for snack mixes, fruit salads, pasta and potato and leaf salads.

Flexibility is ideal to give deli operators the widest menu of grab-and-go offerings while minimizing packaging inventory.

"We offer 2- and 3-compartment, medium and large size, clear PET-plastic snack boxes that retailers can use for sandwiches or snacks like cheese and crackers or celery, carrots and peanut butter," says Jason Horbac, assistant product manager for supermarkets and processing at the Sabert Corporation, in Sayreville, NJ.

For heat-and-eat prepared foods, Anchor Packaging introduced its new "WAVE" series MicroRaves packaging

last year. These upscale microwavable polypropylene black bases and leak-resistant, anti-fog clear lids come in a variety of shapes and sizes and provide a quick and easy way to reheat prepared meals.

"This new packaging offers an ergonomic design for ease of use and attractive, smooth sidewalls to maximize the display space with eye-catching yet functional products. Crystal clear lids allow the various foods to shine through allowing the shopper to mix and match their families' meal preferences," says Anchor Packaging's Stapleton.

Make It Easy

Presenting meal and snack choices in a simple and easy-to-decide way is the ticket to success for deli grab-and-go programs. The two best ways to accomplish this are through cross merchandising and meal bundling.

"Create a grab-and-go section in the cold case by cross merchandising sandwiches, salads and soups along with water and juices. This gives shoppers a way to grab what they want in a timely fashion and go out the door," suggests Blount's Sewall.

Bundling is huge. In fact, more than half (51 percent) of consumers say it is important that soup be bundled with other items and 60 percent say the same about salads, according to Technomic's 2014 *Left Side of the Menu: Soup & Salad Consumer Trend Report*. Additionally, 58 percent of consumers say they are more likely to order soup as a combo meal than as a single item.

"Add 8-ounces of soup for 99-cents to the price of a salad or sandwich and advertise it as a combo meal. This entices customers away from QSR or fast casual restaurants, gets the average ring of the check up and still makes money," says Blount's Sewall.

Deli operators can do the same with rotisserie chicken and sides.

"Bundle a chicken with choice of two of our Fixin's, bread and a beverage. Depending on the area of the country, retail margins and aggressiveness of pricing, a meal deal like this sells for anywhere from \$11.99 to \$17.99 and feeds a family of four. Display all the components in one place and sign it well. Customers love it. They don't have to wait in a line. They can just grab a delicious healthy meal for their families and go," says BD&K's Jordan.

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