

MENU TRENDS:

ON-SITE Sales Drivers

IN FOODSERVICE THE NAME OF THE GAME IS BUILDING SALES, AND NOTHING does that as effectively as knowing what customers are interested in buying and experiencing.

In this two-part series, Nation's Restaurant News looks at the top 10 trends influencing sales in the on-site segment as revealed through a survey of on-site operators. The first section delves into the profit potential of tapping into such sales drivers as nutrition, sandwiches, vegetarian specialties, organic fare and breakfasts.

The second installment, which will appear in the July 19 issue of NRN, will explore the popularity of ethnic and comfort foods, beverages, made-to-order fare and the importance of convenience.

Paul King, NRN's on-site editor, directed this special series.

For proof that nutrition finally has become a mainstream trend in on-site cafeterias, look no further than Aramark. The Philadelphia-based food management giant recently spent several months and thousands of dollars surveying more than 80,000 of its customers to come up with a customizable nutrition program for all of its accounts nationwide.

And Aramark is not alone in its push to accommodate the growing throngs of nutrition-

NUTRITION

Contract feeders develop more health-conscious programs as an increasing number of people become diet-savvy consumers

By Paul King

conscious consumers. Most on-site operators, from those running corporate accounts to those in elementary schools, have taken heed of the need to give their patrons more healthful food options as well as more nutrition information.

A survey of 1,000 consumers conducted June 7-14 by Port Washington, N.Y.-based NPD Group found that while 54 percent of respondents said they ate whatever tastes good to them, 23 percent said they monitor the nutritional value of what they eat. Meanwhile, 17 percent said they eat as many low- or no-fat foods and low- and no-sugar foods as they can. And 15 percent said they feel that a low-carbohydrate diet is the best way to lose weight.

Aramark's goal is to figure out through its new program how its customers make food choices. Called Just4U, the program uses a matrix to determine which of six types of customers — from the most health conscious to the most indulgent — are most prevalent at an account. The account manager then formulates a nutrition program to satisfy his or her customer base.

"We call it 'food that fits your life,'" says Chris Malone, senior

vice president of marketing for Aramark. "We understand there are myriad consumer styles and preferences in our accounts. Just4U allows us to deliver on a daily basis exactly what customers are looking for."

More important, Malone notes, Just4U indicates that Aramark believes customers finally have become serious about nutrition.

"More than 50 percent of the population is focused on nutrition," he says. "But there is such a diversity among our customers in terms of what they consider to be the right diet that we need to be flexible."

At the University of Pennsylvania, where Just4U has been tested since mid-April, Aramark has seen a 25-percent increase in the number of customers asking about healthful items and a 13-percent rise in the number of customers ordering low-fat foods.

Aramark is not alone in seeing nutrition as a growing concern among customers. The health care foodservice group Morrison Management Specialists also has experienced an increase in customer interest in the topic.

"We have always had nutritional offerings in our cafeterias every day, and with those items we posted nutrition information," says Curt Seidl, vice president of culinary services for Atlanta-based Morrison. "What customers want now is for us to post nutrition information on everything we sell so they can decide and piece together what they think is a healthful meal for themselves."

Seidl notes that such an attitude has created some interesting approaches to nutrition.

"Customers are picking and choosing their vice for the day," he explains. "For instance, we're selling as many French fries and onion rings as ever. But now customers may choose a veggie burger or another healthful food to go with their fries."

Seidl also says a significant percentage of customers are asking for smaller portions of foods.

"We see this more in teaching hospitals or urban settings," he notes. "Customers want to put together a tasting plate of three or four items from the entrée line. But I think this is as much an offshoot of the whole tapas trend as it is a nutritional thing."

Morrison, in its vending machines, has begun to highlight foods and snack items with colored stickers to indicate their healthfulness, with green indicating the most healthful items and red designating the true junk foods. Seidl says vending sales of healthful foods have gone up since the program was put into place.

So widespread has the diet craze become that healthful foods even can be found at sports events. Sportservice, the Buffalo, N.Y.-based sports concessionaire, offers a variety of healthful foods in several of its accounts. At Busch Stadium in St. Louis, fans can buy low-carbohydrate grilled veggie and chicken Caesar wraps. Bison burgers, grilled salmon and turkey hot dogs on low-carb buns are standard fare at Cleveland's Jacobs Field. At the new Petco Park in San Diego, wraps and tuna steak sandwiches are among the offerings.

"But even as we add new menu items to meet the needs of fans who are low-carb dieters or vegetarians, we still remain committed to serving bratwurst, hot dogs and nachos," notes Rolf Baumann, corporate executive chef for Sportservice.

As nutrition becomes more ingrained in the American psyche, the next phase will be the promotion of functional foods, according to Deanne Brandstetter, director of nutrition for Flik International in Rye Brook, N.Y.

"Customers want a positive message," Brandstetter says. "They are tired of being told what not to eat. Functional foods give us the opportunity to tell them, 'Eat this, and this is why.'"

The idea of functional foods, she adds, is from the human genome project, where scientists have learned that genetics play a large role in the incidence of chronic illnesses.

"The wave of the future will be to help reduce these illnesses by manipulating diets based on your genes," she explains.

Although functional foods as a nutrition subtrend is in its infancy, Brandstetter says it easily can be incorporated into on-site operations, because "a surprising number of items are very common foods, such as tomatoes and garlic. So we can do a summer tomato promotion and tell customers that tomatoes are good for you because they are high in lycopene."

Another fairly common functional food, flaxseed, already has become a signature item at Flik, in the form of flaxseed granola bars. The bars are made from a recipe that Brandstetter developed, and she notes: "We can't keep them in stock at some accounts. We also use flaxseed as a topping on salad and cereal bars, and it's very popular."



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