

Convenience Store News

Five Foodservice Trends for 2014

CHICAGO – With 2014 just around the corner, it's that time of year when research firms put on their prognosticating hats and predict key trends to look for in the next year.

Culinary Visions Panel, a food focused insight and trend forecasting firm also based in Chicago, says "Mindfulness" was a common theme among foodservice professionals and consumer foodies surveyed in 2013. During the year, insight was collected from primary research with more than 3,500 consumers and analyzed along with research gathered from culinary professional groups and more than 20 domestic and international trade conferences.

According to the firm, consumers still rate convenience and value as important criteria in their food decisions, yet there is a growing mindfulness of food and beverage choices and a sincere desire to create a lifestyle that balances healthfulness and indulgence in everyday life.

The conversations about food and beverages are focused on enjoyment and deliciousness as defined by the consumer. Also important to the conversation was the growing awareness of the impact on the people involved in the cultivation and delivery of food and the long-term ability to sustain the world population and the planet.

Following are some common themes that emerged from the research and what they suggest for the coming year:

Deliciousness as a Lifestyle Choice: Food has to be delicious to appeal to consumers -- from the value conscious to the gourmet. When consumers are asked to list the most delicious foods, that list often includes some of the most notorious processed foods of minimal nutritional value. Yet when consumers are presented with provocative menu descriptions that focus on taste, flavors and ingredients, they will often rate the more healthful items as highly desirable. At the International Dairy Deli Bakery Association Conference this year, chairperson Voni Woods, senior director of deli at Giant Eagle, inspired attendees with her personal commitment to helping consumers of all income levels understand that there are no evil ingredients; balance and mindfulness of portion sizes can inspire all consumers to make deliciousness their lifestyle choice.

Seeking balance: Consumers want to be in charge of balancing their choices and enjoy the freedom to indulge when they choose as part of an overall healthy lifestyle. Culinary Visions Panel research shows that consumers evaluate various types of food venues differently when they balance their choices. The research covered away from home venues including quick service, casual dining, convenience stores, cafeterias at school and at work, gourmet retail and supermarket delis and bakeries.

Escape from deprivation: The concept of banning foods does not work on school and college campuses and it fails in the commercial market as well. Identifying "villainous" ingredients is on the way out. The future is about reformulating, and many food manufacturers are making subtle changes to product formulations to create more healthful profiles without compromising enjoyment for consumers.

Minimalism: When consumers look at labels, they want to see ingredients that sound more like a recipe than a science formula. “Homemade” is the term used often by young consumers and adults to describe a high-quality experience. Scale and uniformity are not in style as consumers are enjoying foods that look less processed, or more like they have come from a kitchen than a factory. Clean ingredient statements are often at the top of the criteria list for manufacturer product development teams. Just look to some of the leading private brands to see what’s trending with mainstream consumers, words like “real,” “pure” and “simple” abound.

Invisibly healthy: Seductively healthy foods that provide the satisfaction of “junk” food are finding favor with consumers. Fun packaging and contemporary marketing are adding new appeal to healthy produce snacks like blueberries and carrots. The salty, crunchy satisfaction of packaged snacks is now available in a variety of sizes and includes many different types of vegetables like kale and sweet potatoes.

All-day satisfaction: College campuses are on the cutting edge of understanding the consumer of tomorrow. Few professionals are as adept at the all-day balancing act as those that must satisfy customers who sometimes shop on campus five to six times a day and expect fresh food at all times. In a spirited discussion at an industry conference this year, a college operator warned her commercial colleagues that when today’s students graduate they will bring their high expectations for quality and service with them. On college campuses, the day and night dichotomy of indulgence is commonplace. During daytime hours the demand is for healthy, mindful eating, but when the sun goes down indulgence is what sells.

Idealism meets reality: More mindful of the realities of embracing eating local, consumers are learning that integrity can still exist with some mindful compromise. When large food companies and restaurant chains get involved in supporting their local communities, they are finding favor with mainstream consumers who want to enjoy their meals and have a clear conscience.

Mindfulness of brand language: Consumers use many criteria to evaluate healthfulness, including ingredients, emotion and social concern. Traditional free-from claims are moving to more contemporary claims that sell fresh and homemade with clean ingredient statements. Ethical food is becoming a cue for healthy. Descriptive words without a standard of identity have proliferated to the point that they have become meaningless. Consumers are more inclined to seek out the source and understand their food philosophy rather than pick up products with unsupported claims like natural or artisan. Leading food manufacturers and food retailers are making it easy for consumers to connect with their philosophy in statements on their website and practices in their businesses.

Marketers mindful of earning consumer trust: Trust is a significant factor in brand choices. Consumers want companies they trust to deliver nourishing, great tasting food with respect for those who produce it and the planet. Millennial consumers in particular are evaluating companies not only on their products and their brands, but also on their corporate conscience. Today’s consumer is active and in charge when it comes to the foods they like and the places they like to eat. When surveyed about sources they trust, friends, family and social networks outrank marketing messages. Savvy marketers have learned how to stimulate or join the conversation, not just react to fallout.

Transformation of the consumer: Technology has made everything “smart,” empowering consumers with information to fuel their decision making and helping them make more mindful choices about what they choose to eat and drink. Economic conditions have created a new scrutiny of value by consumers across every socio-economic level. Enabled by technology and social networks, consumers are smart and connected.

In the year ahead, delicious, simple food, made right, will be on trend, according to Culinary Visions Panel. Increasingly educated and empowered consumers who revel in their own knowledge of what they like to eat and drink will be calling the shots.