

## **Foodservice Forecast: The Consumer Experience**

Part 1 in Fare's look at the fuzzy, far-off future of foodservice at retail

OAK BROOK, Ill. -- The relationship between consumers and brands has always been a fascinating one, but never so much as it is today. Social media and mobile technology, brand fixation such as with Apple, the aging of baby boomers and Gen Yers coming into their own are all creating a throw-it-at-the-wall-and-see-what-sticks marketing environment.

"Right now retailers and marketers are in an experimental period," says Michelle Barry, president and CEO of Centric, a "brand anthropology" consultancy in Seattle. "Folks are trying a lot of different things, looking for the next significant trend wave. Some are great ideas; some are conceived in a shopperless vacuum."

Three complementary themes are largely responsible for many of these experiments: interaction, customization and control.

At colleges and hospitals, food stations--where food is prepped in front of the consumer--is replacing the cafeteria line. In c-stores, retailers are ushering in as many made-to-order elements as they can, from sandwiches to lattes.

"They don't want to see food coming out of this hole in the wall in the back where there's a kitchen--they think," says James Camacho, president of consultancy Camacho & Associates, Atlanta. The younger generation's desire to customize and control its eating experiences is shaping how companies go to market.

"We used to say 'We're the Starbucks of fill-in-the-blank.' Now, it's 'We're the Chipotle of fill-in-the-blank,'" says Aaron Noveshen, founder and president of The Culinary Edge, San Francisco.

The difference: Provide meaningful customization, not just customization for customization's sake.

"People don't want too many choices. It's all about that balance between speed, quality and having ingredients that are the right ones that don't compete with each other," Noveshen says.

And what happens when brands pair customization with Gen Y's other favorite factor, technology? "People will become the chefs and the creators if you give them the palette," he says. He points to a concept on the East Coast where customers' creations are displayed for others to try out. Signs show the top trending items, and the customer whose creation is ordered the most receives credits for free food.

This demand for interaction, customization and control is greatly changing the brand-customer relationship. "We see the consumer taking on the role of curator of his or her culinary identity," says Rachel Tracy, managing director of Culinary Visions Panel, Chicago. "Savvy marketers have learned how to stimulate or join the conversation, not just react to the fallout."

Just remember who's in charge: the consumer. "This requires listening and responding, and many brands are wrestling with that," says Rodney Mason, CMO of marketing firm Moosylvania, St. Louis. "They don't want to have a conversation; they want to spend money on talking about themselves and watch their businesses grow. It doesn't work that way anymore."

Barry agrees: "The greatest challenge for retailers and marketers will be to dig deep and reach beyond basic notions of commodities and transactions to create a soulful brand experience."