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BUSINESS

MARKETING MERCHANDISING MANAGEMENT PROCUREMENT

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How To Go Green



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How To Go Green In The Deli

It's all about products, packaging and placement.

BY CAROL BAREUTHER

When you walk into Zingerman's Delicatessen, you'll only see 'green' on the menu twice. One is for the New Mexico green chilies tucked into signature sandwiches like corned beef on rye. The second is the custom-blended greens in the Farmer's Market, Greek and Cobb Salads. However, this iconic deli in Ann Arbor, MI, is a trendsetter in 'green' when that means environmentally-sustainable practices. This spans from the deli's sourcing of full-flavored, traditionally-made ingredients from vendors with planet-forward initiatives to serving this fare in eco-friendly packaging and selling it from a store where all lighting has been changed to LED over the past few years.

"We are fortunate to live in a community that highly values sustainability. Our community passed the Community Climate Action Millage this week, where we have pledged

to collect and invest an estimated \$7 million per year for 20 years to fund local clean energy, waste reduction, energy efficiency, sustainable food and resilience programs and services," says Jennifer Santi, marketing and communications manager for Zingerman's.

Not every supermarket deli nationwide may have the resources and flexibility of this single-store independent. However, every operator can find a springboard of ideas and inspiration from Zingerman's, plus the many manufacturers and suppliers whose products can feed into deli-green programs. The benefit is that programs such as this have moved beyond 'feel-good' initiatives to potent sales drivers.

"Sustainability continues to be an increasingly important part of the decision-making process for consumers. In fact, data in a 2021 CCRRC (Coca-Cola Retailing Research Council of North America) report shows a willingness by consumers to drive up to

10 minutes further to shop at a store that they feel is making a stronger positive impact on the environment," says David Rubin, manager of marketing and new product development for packaging manufacturer, Sabert Corp., in Sayreville, NJ. "Consumers have also reported that they are willing to spend more for sustainable choices, with some data showing that about 82% of consumers are willing to pay up to 10% more for sustainable products at retail. This is up from an average of about 40% when this same question was asked in 2019. Again, being a sustainability-minded organization is no longer just nice to have; consumers, are backing this up with their wallets."

According to Emanuela Bigi, marketing manager at Veroni, based in Logan Township, NJ, consumers are becoming increasingly aware of sustainability matters.

"They are paying more attention to aspects such as how the goods they find in

stores are produced or the packaging materials,” Bigi says.

The company analyzes consumer-driven sustainability trends and combines the data in order to develop products that meet changing consumer needs.

HOW TO – PRODUCTS

One deli sustainability trend is production claims, according to Anne-Marie Roerink, principal and founder of 210 Analytics, LLC, in San Antonio, TX. “Whether we look at deli meat, cheese or prepared foods, we are seeing the same types of claims rising that we’ve seen in the packaged departments. This includes organic, antibiotic-free, gluten-free, less sugar, protein-enhanced, etc. For instance, while most stores stock conventional rotisserie chickens, more are also offering antibiotic-free or organic chickens in the deli. This is also where better-for-the-animal is starting to appear, with more options such as free range and humanely raised.”

At Zingerman’s, the turkey source for its sandwiches is a third-generation family farm in Minnesota that uses no antibiotics or preservatives, says Santi. “Similarly, the Great Lakes Potato Chip Co., which we partner with to make our private label chips, sources Michigan-grown potatoes and is a leader in the environmental community in our state. Survey our cheese case and you’ll find many small cheesemakers from the U.S. and abroad that use organic or locally-sourced milk for their products.”

Veroni recently launched its antibiotic-free line from pigs raised by family-owned farms that promote good animal husbandry practices. With the company’s program, no antibiotics or hormones can be administered to pigs in any growing stage.

“Furthermore, their diet is exclusively plant-based,” Bigi says. “In order to offer an even healthier and more genuine product, the Prosciutto Italiano contains no artificial ingredients and is minimally processed, while the salami contains no nitrates except for those naturally occurring in celery juice powder and salt.”

Artisan-cured meat producer, Volpi Foods, has focused on transitioning its ingredient sourcing to Raised Responsibly farmers according to Deanna Depke, marketing manager for the St. Louis, MO-headquartered company. “Within the deli, animal welfare is a leading trend that appeals to a wide range of shoppers.”

Similarly, Niman Ranch offers a line of Certified Humane deli products, which

includes charcuterie, sliced meats and on-the-go snack options.

“Last year, we completed a robust survey of our farmer network and found very high adoption rates of sustainable farming practices including cover crops, land in conservation, pollinator habitat and more. We compiled this research into our first Impact Report that we share both digitally and at our partner stores,” says Alicia LaPorte, communications director for the Westminster, CO-based producer.

Eating more plant-based foods is an earth-friendly goal for many consumers. In fact, 31% of consumers surveyed in the University of Minnesota’s College of Food, Agriculture and Natural Resource Sciences Insights survey, conducted in May 2022, said they planned to incorporate more plant protein in their diet.

“This varies by age group, but Millennials especially try to buy more environmentally-conscious brands and plant-based items,” says Carl Cappelli, senior vice president of sales and business development for Don’s Prepared Foods, in Schwenksville, PA. “Last year, we introduced five ready-to-eat clean-ingredient Better Bowls, and two

are plant-based. These are a Korean BBQ Style Chick’n Bowl and Plant-Based Burrito Bowl.”

Plant-based demand is a potent driver for products like hummus.

“It is not a new plant-based alternative for a less sustainable food so there is no sacrifice to flavor,” says Olugbenga Diyaolu, global chief research, development and sustainability officer at the White Plains, NY-headquartered Sabra Dipping Co., which makes its product in a green-building-certified LEED facility. “Perhaps the most important, and too often overlooked, driver when it comes to making sustainable choices is surprisingly simple: taste.”

HOW TO – PACKAGING

Choosing ‘green’ food packaging is a two-for way deli operators can increase their sustainability efforts. That is, both in sourcing products and serving deli foods.

In 2021, Veroni introduced an eco-friendly tray made of 75% less plastic than traditional Veroni trays and FSC-certified paper that was first launched in Italy.

On the sourcing side, Tillamook County Creamery Association (TCCA),

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PROUDLY WISCONSIN

CRAVE BROTHERS FARMSTEAD CLASSICS
 MASCARPONE
 MADE WITH FRESH SWEET CREAM
 "HANDCRAFTED ON OUR DAIRY FARM IN THE FINEST WISCONSIN TRADITION."
 Net Wt 8 OZ (226g)
 Take me home and taste the sweet cream difference."

a farmer-owned cooperative of cheese and dairy producers in Tillamook, OR, has committed to making its product packaging 100% recyclable, reusable or compostable by 2030. Another example is Volpi Foods, which this year converted all bagged snack items to its Eco-Pack initiative through a first-in-the-nation recyclable material.

In the deli, a nationwide study by Chicago-based Culinary Visions revealed that 65% of consumers reported they were concerned about the environmental impact of take-out and to-go packaging.

“Consumers want to act sustainably and expect operators to enable this with recyclable or reusable offerings,” says Kurt Richards, director of market development and sustainability for Anchor Packaging, in St. Louis, MO. “Consumers are also quickly learning what materials provide these benefits after food contact and which must still be thrown away. PP (polypropylene) and PET (polyethylene terephthalate) packaging remains recyclable after use and offers reusability benefits, as well.”

More sustainable packaging also makes financial sense for retailers, Richards adds. “PP containers protect food quality longer, extending hold times for profitable grab-and-go favorites and reducing the need to overproduce. Any food that remains can be moved directly to the cold case, reducing food waste and secondary packaging costs.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF BETTER EARTH

A focal point for consumers, too, is the PCR (post-consumer recycled) percentage of packaging, adds Kali Kinziger, product manager at Placon, in Madison, WI. “Most of the industry is 25% or 50%. We push for and have available for buyers to spec 75% and 100%. There’s a cost difference, but not

big. About 10% more. Consider, too, that delis will often prioritize selling premium foods in sustainable packaging. We’re seeing more grain bowls sold this way.”

In December, Placon introduced its new sustainable, tamper-evident, crystal-clear line of deli food containers called Cravings. These are produced with PCR PET material and are recyclable. Sizes range from 8-32 ounces, ideal for fresh-cut fruits and vegetables, deli salads and other cold applications.

Another option is the disposable, compostable Better Box Collection from Better Earth LLC, in Clarkston, GA. The strong, bamboo kraft and PLA (polylactic acid) bioplastic-made boxes are available in customizable shapes and sizes, each with a smart interlocking design and complementary tamper-evident seals to make sure food travels safely and securely. These can be custom branded with a deli’s logo, as well.

Better Earth recently introduced its World Wraps PLA—a corn-based bioplastic mineral paper, which is grease-proof. The 12x12-inch sheets, available in colors like a natural tan, white and newsprint, are ideal as sandwich wraps and lining clamshells in fried food applications.

“It’s a product that’s a great substitute for traditional wax-based deli wraps,” says Joseph Bild, CEO and president. “We can custom extrude the wrap in different sizes, which is unlike regular deli paper. For



PHOTO COURTESY OF ECOTENSIL

example, we just worked with a 22-location concept in a major Midwest city and are producing 16x18-inch wraps for them. Beyond this, we also did a full menu packaging audit for them and identified 25 to 30 SKUs that could be easily converted to compostable packaging.”

The biggest trend 210 Analytics’ Roerink sees is grocery retailers integrating sustainability into packaging like single-serve bowls and plastic ware. “One of the pandemic trends with staying power has been the popularity of on-the-go eating. For most retailers, sales of prepackaged items remain elevated, and this presents a packaging conundrum.”

One solution is Sabert Corp.’s newly-launched line of paper square bowls, which are a good option for operators looking to increase their usage of easy-to-recycle packaging, says Taylor Rosenblum, associate product manager. “These new bowls offer a fully recyclable PFAS (poly- and perfluoroalkyl substances)-free paperboard base as well as a fully recyclable PET lid.”

Another is sustainable paperboard utensils from EcoTensil, Inc., which are compostable, recyclable, sustainably sourced and certified plastic-free.

“The single-use plastic ban in Europe has created considerable demand for plastic-free cutlery alternatives across the pond. Plus, people don’t like how wood cutlery can negatively affect the taste experience of their food. So, the smooth and sturdy EcoTensils and EcoTasters have been an ideal solution,” says Peggy Cross, founder and CEO of the Corte Madera, CA-headquartered company.

The new EcoTensil ‘AquaDot’ paperboard is akin to a coffee cup stock: moisture-resistant, taste-free, sturdy and heat-resistant. Bamboo dispensers, which come in several styles, hold EcoSpoons where customers can tear off a single utensil and scoop foods that don’t require a knife for cutting. This is ideal for prepared food bars. Operators can also include an EcoSpoon, with choices from 3 to 5-inches long, on single-serve foods. This practice, says Cross, increases the likelihood a consumer will pick up that product to eat right away and encourages impulse sales.

HOW TO PLACE

The trend towards greater grab-and-go versus service counter deli purchases is driving a need for refrigerated cases.

“We’re currently working with our local utility company, DTE Energy, to better understand our energy usage so that we can



PHOTO COURTESY OF BETTER EARTH

make better-informed choices about how to invest our resources in equipment sourcing and upgrades,” says Zingerman’s Santi.

Manufacturers like Dover Food Retail, in El Dorado Hills, CA, have many options for sustainable refrigeration, according to Jack Sjogren, western region design center specialist. “One is R-290 refrigerant (propane), which has a very low global warming value versus traditional HFC refrigerants. We have and continue to move many of our self-contained self-service deli cases to this refrigerant as regulations allow.”

The second, Sjogren says, is using reach-in rather than traditional open-door cases to merchandise deli products. These

use energy-free doors and the company’s latest Optimax 7 LED lighting. This lighting also brings out the natural enticing colors of the food products.

TELL THE STORY

Use the deli’s sustainable products, packaging and place in display, merchandising and promotion.

“We are well known for telling stories about our food, relationships with vendors and our commitment to our guiding principles, so our customers and followers expect a high level of detail from us about everything we do. We weave these stories into our in-store signage, our conversations with our

guests, our print and email newsletters and our social media,” says Zingerman’s Santi.

Providing detailed source information at the point of sale makes it easy for shoppers to make a conscious purchase, according to Sharon Olson, executive director of Culinary Visions. “Seventy-nine of consumers surveyed said they want to know as much as possible about the food they are eating, and 68% said knowing the source of their food is important to them.”

Niman Ranch has enjoyed success in coupling traditional merchandising efforts with digital storytelling, says LaPorte. “For instance, we have designed window clings and shelf talkers that include high-level sustainability messaging with a QR code to learn more. The QR codes direct to a website with videos, photos and robust information on sustainability so consumers can learn more. You can’t fit much information on a deli meat package, but through QR codes we can share robust data and storytelling.”

Earlier this year, TCCA participated in a cross-category promotion for wine and Tillamook’s Maker’s Reserve 2018 Extra Sharp White Cheddar, says Denise Labrie, sales team lead for deli. “Both the wine producer and TCCA are Certified B Corps, and we included the Certified B Corp logo on point-of-sale materials in store to make it easy for consumers to easily shop for brands that align with their values. Additionally,



PHOTO COURTESY OF ZINGERMAN'S DELI

grouping Certified B Corp products in stores and advertisements are ways operators can apply to reach consumers who are looking for sustainable products.”

Certified B Corps is a private certification of social and environmental performance for for-profit companies.

Lastly, Volpi Foods’ sustainability pledge

has allowed it to successfully integrate into non-traditional retailer events like Earth Day, says Depke. “Typically, an event that does not see deli participation, activating across the digital landscape captured shopper attention and drove home key brand attributes that resonated with sustainably-minded shoppers.”

DB

REUSABLE – THE NEXT EVOLUTION OF SUSTAINABLE PACKAGING

Self-service food stations are resurging in popularity post-pandemic. In fact, 44% of participants in Culinary Visions’ research said they prefer serve-yourself-food bars to pre-packaged salads, according to Sharon Olson, executive director of the Chicago, IL-headquartered culinary marketing practice.

Reusable containers, which have gained use in closed system foodservice operations such as corporate dining and campus education where sustainability is often a top priority, may not be feasible in a retail environment where the community is large and diverse and safety is of paramount concern, but it may be an opportunity to explore.

Zingerman’s Delicatessen, in Ann Arbor, MI, did so as a founding restaurant in the city’s Reduce, Reuse, Return reusable container program, currently in a second pilot phase. Led by the non-profit Live Zero Waste, this program aims to reduce the amount of waste produced by restaurants in the community by providing restaurant patrons with reusable,

returnable take-out containers.

“The program was provided seed money from the City of Ann Arbor’s Office of Sustainability and Innovations and has benefited from time and commitment from several area restaurants. We are currently piloting the containers in our coffee café and looking for ways to expand their use around our business,” says Jennifer Santi, Zingerman’s marketing and communications manager.

Reusable is the next evolution of sustainable packaging, according to Kurt Richards, director of market development and sustainability for Anchor Packaging, in St. Louis, MO. “To address this need, we are introducing Anchorware Reusables. These clear PP (polypropylene) containers are microwave and dishwasher-safe, BPA (bisphenol A)-free, and PFAS (poly- and perfluoroalkyl substances)-free, and curbside recyclable after many uses. Because more than 80% of consumers report they keep and clean containers to reuse again, reusable packaging helps drive repeat purchases.”

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