

Attracting Eco-Conscious Shoppers With Sustainable Sustenance

Tips to help food retailers drive sales among sustainability-minded consumers

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With the advent of Earth Month and Earth Day in April, environmentally friendly business practices are poised to be a top trending topic on social networks and related outlets. As consumers—millennials in particular—seek out natural, organic, non-GMO and clean-label products, many are extending that mindfulness to the businesses they patronize, including restaurants and grocery stores.

One recent report from the Shelton Group reveals that 70% of millennials say that a company's environmental focus influences their purchasing decisions.

Another new report from the **Culinary Visions Panel's Mindful Dining Initiative** finds that younger consumers have certain eco-expectations for ethical snacks and grab-and-go foods; according to that report, ethical efforts in foodservice, from vegan food options to composting on-site, are important for millennial consumers.

"From sustainable farming to free-range eggs, consumers do not want their dining choices to have unintended negative consequences," said Sharon Olson, executive director of the Culinary Visions Panel, in a release. "Whether it's rewarding a company's fair-trade labor practices or their zero-waste policies, we found that millennials are the most serious about ethically sourced grab-and-go foods."

Operators are hearing and responding to such demands for greater sustainability among millennials, younger Gen Z consumers and other demographic bases. In its 2018 report on the State of Restaurant Sustainability, the National Restaurant Association (NRA) found that about eight in 10 operators use energy-efficient lighting; six in 10 use programmable heating, ventilation and air conditioning thermostats; and more than four in 10 use energy-rated refrigerators, freezers and ice makers.

Food waste is a big topic among today's shoppers, especially young consumers. To that end, NRA's report found that about half of foodservice operators track the amount of food waste that their operation generates.

Foodservice operations within supermarkets can heed marketplace demands for sustainable practices and put them into action. "There are several things that grocery stores can do to drive sales while cutting down on food waste while simultaneously attracting sustainability-minded consumers, particularly millennials," says Steve Johnson, "Grocerant Guru" at the Tacoma, Wash.-based Foodservice Solutions consulting firm.

Johnson offers several suggestions. To cut down on food waste in a store's foodservice area, he recommends replacing bagged salads with abundant presentations of fresh mixed greens in the service deli, portioning protein to drive speed of service and reduce waste, and preparing and displaying foods in smaller quantities by daypart.

Repurposing and recycling are other ways to demonstrate a commitment to sustainable practices. "Provide takeout containers that are smaller and made from recycled materials. Adopt a 'less packaging is better for you' mindset. Display and sell bottled water in the prepared food area, and have bottles made from plastic that decomposes," says Johnson.