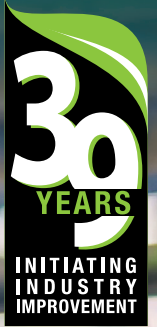


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SPECIAL SECTION



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Harvesting Success: Survey Reveals Trends Reshaping the Retail Produce Landscape

By Sharon Olson

Consumer preferences are constantly evolving in the vibrant realm of retail produce, and staying attuned to evolving shopper preferences is the key to success. The recent Les Dames d'Escoffier (LDEI) Trend Survey unveiled insights about consumer food lifestyles that are especially pertinent to produce managers in retail stores.

LDEI is an international organization of women leaders in the food, beverage and hospitality industries. Delving into the findings, five key trends emerged.

1. LOCAL AND SUSTAINABLE SOURCING

Consumers are increasingly drawn to the origins of their produce, valuing local and sustainable sourcing. The LDEI study underscores the importance of connecting with local farmers and adopting sustainable practices. For produce managers, this presents an opportunity to create a narrative around the freshness and environmental stewardship of their products.

Sustainability is a continuing journey of understanding for today's shoppers. Survey participants noted the hunt is on for new terminology to replace the often green-washed word "sustainable." Ninety-three percent of survey participants agreed that new vocabulary beyond "sustainable" is emerging.

Produce sections can highlight locally sourced and responsibly grown items, emphasizing the community ties and reduced carbon footprint associated with these choices. Engaging signage and educational materials can help communicate the commitment to responsible sourcing.

2. COOKING RENAISSANCE

The survey highlights a growing interest in home cooking made easy. The pandemic fueled more interest in cooking at home, and a significant number of consumers are embracing the cooking skills they acquired.

The pace of life has accelerated post-pandemic, but the taste for home cooking has not diminished, even though the time available for meal preparation is substantially reduced. Convenient packages for fruits and vegetables that are ready to cook or consume without much prep are in demand.

Ninety-six percent of survey participants agreed ready-to-cook fresh produce is growing in popularity.

Produce managers can leverage this trend by expanding product offerings to include freshly prepped, kitchen-ready produce. Featuring fresh herbs and condiments can add to the sense of discovery for shoppers, encouraging them to explore new flavors.

Consider organizing themed displays or weekly spotlights on seasonal items. Collaborating with local chefs for recipe demonstrations featuring these specialty products can further pique customer interest and drive sales.

3. WELLNESS-CENTRIC OFFERINGS

Health and wellness are top of mind for consumers, and the produce department is a prime area to address these concerns.

The LDEI study notes an increasing interest in functional foods with health benefits. Ninety-three percent of those surveyed agreed that foods and beverages with medicinal benefits are growing in popularity.

Today's shoppers are also increasingly interested in the backstory on the food they consume and are hungry to learn more.

Panel members noted that supermarkets are adding "produce butchers" to help shoppers better understand a wider range of produce offerings. Produce managers can respond by curating wellness-centric displays, educating team members and labeling items with nutritional information and recipe suggestions.

4. TECH INTEGRATION FOR CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT

As technology continues to play a significant role in shaping consumer behavior, produce managers can harness that power to enhance customer engagement.

The survey notes the impact of TikTok cuisine driving food experiences for a younger generation. Implementing digital platforms for recipe sharing, virtual cooking classes, and interactive content can create a dynamic and engaging shopping experience.

Despite the efficiency of digital ordering platforms, forward-thinking retailers are creating distinctively appealing in-store experiences to welcome customers. Eighty-six percent of those surveyed agreed that grocery stores are offering more unique specialty items to lure consumers in-store to shop.

5. SEASONAL CELEBRATIONS AND LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

The LDEI study emphasizes the importance of seasonal celebrations and local partnerships. For produce managers, this translates into an opportunity to collaborate with local businesses, farmers and artisans.

Eighty-six percent of survey participants agreed retail venues that combine elements of supermarkets, convenience stores and restaurants into a single location are becoming popular with shoppers.

Ninety-two percent of survey participants agreed that pop-ups appeal to consumers' desires for exclusive culinary adventures.

Produce managers can explore exclusive partnerships with local suppliers to feature limited-time offerings and unique products tied to seasonal themes.

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Sharon Olson is executive director of Culinary Visions, a division of Olson Communications, Inc. based in Chicago. Culinary Visions is a food-focused insight and trend forecasting firm that provides original consumer and culinary professional research for companies in the food industry. She is an active member of LDEI and has worked on the LDEI trend report since its inception in 2018.