

By Sally Lyons Wyatt and Jonna Parker, IRI

During 2020, many of us embraced our inner chefs, getting closer to our kitchens and adjusting some of the foods we keep in them. With most of us forced indoors due to the pandemic, the percentage of U.S. consumers' meals made and eaten at home nearly doubled, jumping from 48% in 2019 to a whopping 85% in 2020. And, with some of the extra time consumers had during lockdown, 38% reported embracing the chance to improve their health by starting a diet or making better choices in the kitchen. Following these trends, it's no surprise the fresh food category ended 2020 on a high note.

As we weave our way through 2021 and set our sights on the pandemic hopefully winding down this year, fresh foods remain a vital component to both the in-store and online shopping experiences. From supercenters and convenience stores to coffee shops and fast-casual dining, almost every channel that sells food has shifted toward a more fresh-forward format. With all of the offerings now available in fresh food, how can your store or product stand out from the crowd? Three key areas offer retailers and manufacturers fantastic differentiation opportunities, whether in-store, online or out-of-store with digital or other media.

1. INCORPORATE MUST-HAVE MEAL MAKERS

Even with many restaurants across the U.S. opening up, most consumers' meal experiences are still taking place at home. Capture shoppers' attention by highlighting meal makers such as fresh herbs, ground meats and chicken breasts or versatile, multi-meal staples like fresh tomatoes, and anchor them to other promotions across your store.

In-Store Opportunity: Create solutions instead of silos with secondary signage or multi-item price promotions, then connect them to core meal-maker components.

Out-of-Store Opportunity: Use out-of-store media to tout your products, such as fresh vegetables or hot-and-ready items available at affordable prices.

Online Opportunity: Leverage social media to promote recipes or baking tips featuring fresh items that will help you capitalize on consumers' continued desire for one-stop shopping and ensure that you are getting that full meal-maker plate.

2. BUILD DIFFERENTIATION FACTORS IN FRESH

Things that used to signal “fresh” are now commonplace – almost every retailer with an in-store bakery offers “fresh bread at 5 p.m.” to shoppers. Instead, think more creatively and provide unique and standout fresh options that reflect your brand and appeal to your core shoppers. For example, if your seafood is known for its quality, hire an itamae/skilled sushi chef to roll fresh sushi specifically for your store – not just the California rolls that are offered even at gas stations these days. Made-in-store fresh tortillas and tortilla chips in Southwestern divisions of a retail banner or fresh-from-the-bakery superfood power granola bars can also get consumers’ attention. Theme weeks in the perimeter, such as a passport to certain countries (especially when not everyone is traveling yet!), a focus on local sports or other fun events, can connect multiple departments such as bakery, cheeses, wine and produce.

In-Store Opportunity: Use signage or décor throughout the store to tie multiple departments together, creating a complete experience that showcases featured products.

Out-of-Store Opportunity: Promote specific foods tied to a certain type of diet, such as keto, Mediterranean or plant-based, showing that consumers can get them all at your store.

Online Opportunity: Social media influencers can help get the word out about your offerings. For example, if you live near wineries, an influencer can promote a picnic basket featuring products found only in your store.

3. OFFER PREMIUM BASKET BUILDERS

No ingredient seems to create quite as much hype every year as pumpkin spice (just think of all the commentary and memes it inspires every fall). At IRI, we suggest that brands think about how to create that type of consumer reaction and experience year-round. In a post-pandemic era, consumers will be looking for a cart-stopping shopping experience that drives their cravings and loyalty to your banner, whether in-store or online. Consider offering limited-time-only meats, cheeses or seasonal fruits, as well as “wow” factor baked goods, to create a fresh, premium experience consumers can’t get enough of – or share enough on their social media pages.

In-Store Opportunity: Connect aisles by offering secondary promotions, such as buy this, try that.

Out-of-Store Opportunity: Use your online channels to tell a product’s story of how it got

to the store, how to use it and how it can create a memorable, unique experience for the consumer.

Online Opportunity: Use a basket builder on your e-commerce platform to offer specialty products as suggestions to accompany the staple meal-maker items.

These ideas, which retailers and manufacturers can collaborate on, can bring shoppers to the physical or online store and keep them excited about the variety of items and experiences waiting for them in the fresh perimeter.

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