

Marketing Food With A Conscience



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Marketing food with a conscience in a relevant way can be challenging. Although today's consumers may be focused on price, tomorrow's consumers are growing up in a world where *going green* is simply expected.

Young consumers have a strong, growing global consciousness with a focus on food ethics. Millennials, who are between 18 and 35 years old today, represent one quarter of the U. S. population. They're the most likely to expect environmentally friendly products when they shop and more likely to buy fair trade products.

When marketing environmentally responsible products and practices, it's more important to think about education than promotion. Young consumers simply expect these options, and those who care most about these initiatives want sincerity and transparency rather than promotion that can cross the line to self-congratulation.

Studying young consumers and their relationships with food can seem like nailing gelatin to the wall; attitudes and awareness change quickly. Yet it's important to capture their attention and their trust. They might not represent the consumer group with the largest buying power today, but they're definitely the consumers of tomorrow.

Millennials are not one homogeneous group; for this discussion, millennial consumers are described as 18 to 26 years old with some college education. As a group, they're concerned about the world and judgmental if they suspect a *green wash* rather than a truly green initiative.

Food Ethics: Food ethics is about the principles of food production and delivery, and it's becoming increasingly important to Millennials. At colleges and universities, they've been encouraged to take an active part in campus policy and programs related to food ethics and social justice. Some universities have worked with their students to craft a Fair Value Statement that highlights what the campus is doing to focus on sustainability based on requests from student groups.

Some supermarket chains have very similar statements, but they're often buried in a scroll-down menu after the store locator and all the deals listed on the home page. That's probably because most customers come to a website to find a store and see what's on sale.

Interest in food with a conscience is growing worldwide as consumers look for certifications by trusted sources, sustainability, animal welfare and local sourcing. Last year, 7 percent of total global food and drink product launches were positioned on an ethical platform, up 6.5 percent from the previous year.

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Sustainability Sells: Young consumers are more likely to pay an additional price for food with a conscience even though their incomes are among the lowest of all the generations. They're among the hardest hit by the current economy; no established careers and no safety net other than family, so value for dollars spent is carefully scrutinized. Organic is nice, but if it's too expensive, they'll go with the local or sustainable option or the producer known for giving back to the community.

Young consumers expect a lot of retailers and restaurants when it comes to sustainable choices. Look at the emergence of the fast-casual restaurant segment where Chipotle is the classic example of sustainability that sells.

Simply Food: Millennials want food that's food; they grew up with nutrition education and school meals that were nutritious but didn't seem like real food to them. Even though their stressed-out, over-booked, multi-tasked lives demand convenience, they want it on their terms. They look for ingredient statements that show food ingredients, not long complicated words they don't understand.

Local has been growing in popularity and there's talk about hyper-local foods such as those grown in on-site gardens and in-house butchering. They don't look at the grocery store as the point of origin for the food they buy. They want to know the provenance of every meal and snack they eat. They covet real and virtual relationships with chefs, farmers and all kinds of authorities on food and food culture.

Food Activism: Young consumers are part of an Internet empowered global community so it's not uncommon to find similar concerns popping up simultaneously in different parts of the world. Food activism is a growing part of American food culture and young, educated consumers are among the first to take up the charge.

One example is a new subculture fueled by the growing awareness of the amount of edible food discarded daily. This new eco trend is called *containering* — or *dumpster diving*; consumers forage for food in supermarket dumpsters. It's growing in America, Europe, Australia and Japan.

Most food retailers regularly engage in many environmentally responsible practices that can be important but don't make the nightly news. Targeted social media outreach with permission can connect customers to values they respect and understand.

Young consumers are thrilled with transparency; they seek it out and hunt it down when it's not readily available. The more they know about your positive practices, the more positive their impression will be of everything they buy in your store.

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