

Convenience Store Decisions

Top 10 Foodservice Trends on Campus

July 9, 2014 — Ten years worth of surveys, interviews and roundtable discussions reveal the evolution of trends in the education segments.

Ten years ago Y-Pulse (ypulse.org) began tracking foodservice trends through the nation's leading foodservice directors in the education segments to give food marketers insight on what would shape the tastes of tomorrow's consumers, and this latest report identifies how young consumers tastes are setting the pace for tomorrow's menus.



In K-12 schools, lunch has become a learning lab empowering young consumers with the knowledge they need to make mindful nutritious choices. Today's school foodservice directors are serving up a lot more than breakfast and lunch; 96% consider teaching nutrition education to be an important part of their job. On college and university campuses foodservice directors are on the cutting edge of experimentation with new foods, new concepts and new delivery systems for some of the most demanding consumers in America.

Healthy By Design

There is still conversation about stealth health in many segments of the foodservice industry, but young consumers have had nutrition education and want to be empowered to make their own choices. The idea of hiding healthy ingredients is going by the wayside as full disclosure and allergen awareness take on greater importance.

There are more fruits and vegetables on the menu than ever before and healthy fats have found their place in a balanced diet. Even when it comes to snacking, millennial consumers want fresh and healthy snacks to feed their cravings on demand. Eighty-three percent considered healthfulness an important criterion for the snacks they chose. Today's consumers want fresh, fast fuel for their bodies. Fresh homemade taste has become the new definition of quality for young consumers.

Wellness as a Way of Life

Wellness policies have been in place for many years in public schools and in a recent Y-Pulse study, 82% of colleges and universities stated that their campus has a wellness policy or program in place. Of the other 18% that did not have a formal policy, 45% said a program was pending.

Successful wellness programs in colleges and universities take a holistic approach including health services, athletics, recreational sports, counseling, and residential life, in addition to foodservice.

Culinary Nutrition On Campus

There is a true collaboration among chefs and dietitians who are becoming a greater force in bringing healthy eating ideas to kids and young adults. Chefs are in the kitchen and not just to offer advice; they are fully engaged, understanding the realities of school foodservice and delivering on the promise of delicious, healthful meals.

Chefs are reinvigorating school kitchens as places to prepare fresh foods, training foodservice workers and pressing unused equipment into service while energizing the cooking process. Registered dietitians are a force on school and college campuses for much more than managing the nutritional integrity of menus; they provide nutrition education and 26% of college students report that an RD is available for personal consultation on their campus.

Cooking Is Back In Style

Fresh cooking on-site is returning to school kitchens. Operators are learning new cooking techniques rather than turning to heavily processed speed scratch ingredients to satisfy their customers.

A combi oven in every kitchen is the dream of school foodservice directors. When foodservice directors were asked if they could have one new piece of equipment what would it be; 72% noted a new item of cooking equipment and 37% of those identified a combi oven specifically.

Cooking is also back in style among young consumers who are often more skilled than their parents. Food television has captivated and enabled an entire generation of consumers and cooking classes and chef demonstrations on college campuses are well attended.

Technology Enabled Connections

In a Y-Pulse study, 95% of foodservice directors in college foodservice said they use social media to connect with their foodservice customers. Eighty-five percent said social media tools are very important or important for promoting foodservice venues.

Foodservice directors are also handling customer feedback in real time to continuously improve the relevance and satisfaction of their foodservice programs.

Campus dining apps are popping up everywhere as operators look to connect their offerings with student lifestyles and social media habits. These new apps allow students to track calories and evaluate menus across campus in real time.

Community Building

Food connects people and creates a sense of community on all types of campuses. Whether it is new construction or mindful renovation, dining areas are being designed to encourage gathering and personal connections among students.

On some college campuses residential dining halls do not offer take out to encourage students to share the experience of a meal together. Community tables are growing in popularity across all segments.

Community eligibility is the newest opportunity for schools with high percentages of low-income children to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students. It has shown to increase participation in K-12, reduce labor costs for schools, and increase federal revenues. Under this option all students eat meals for free and the paperwork requirements are reduced.

Gardens are becoming part of the culinary landscape as the farm to table movement continues to gain momentum. Schools and community gardens bring people together, and some college campuses are serving up dinner on the farm with locally grown foods.

On campuses, foodservice workers and consumers are often one in the same because the operations rely so heavily on student labor. Ingredients coming into the back of the house are often scrutinized as heavily as prepared items being served to customers. Foodservice directors in the education segments are particularly mindful of everyone in their campus community and how important it is for the workers to want to eat the food coming out of their kitchens.

Refining the Dining Experience

Customers want an experience, whether it is at an independent restaurant or a school dining room feeding

the same customers every day. Today's consumers enjoy watching meals being prepared. Barriers between kitchen production and foodservice are coming down. Connecting customers with the dining experience before they even enter the dining room is important.

Display kitchens allow customers to enjoy the experience of seeing their meal being prepared and feel more of a connection to those preparing it. Bringing the kitchen out front has the added advantage of building esteem for the kitchen staff by bringing them out of the back of the house to center stage with customers.

Parents Back In School

Parents are literally and virtually in school kitchens across the country. Whether it is a neighborhood school or a college campus, parents are making their children's nutrition a top priority. K-12 directors in many parts of the country have learned that nutrition education involves the entire family, and many invite them in for lunch or dinner and offer tips on healthy eating that the whole family can embrace.

Educating parents became particularly important when new lunch regulations were imposed on K-12 operators. New school lunch regulations posed significant challenges as healthy became a moving target with regulations that were difficult to execute within the realities of a high volume school kitchen environment and did little to entice students to the lunch table. During a particularly difficult transition period, 42% of foodservice directors noted that they were seeing more lunch brought to school and 37% noted that brown bags often contained less healthful choices that were no longer allowed to be served in school.

Education empowers healthy eating habits for parents and children, and school foodservice directors are at the forefront of efforts to educate the entire family.

The Global Kitchen

Today's college age consumers are more diverse and aware of global cultures and cuisines than any previous generation. Yet even 58% of K-12 foodservice directors say that almost all of their students expect to see ethnic foods on the menu regardless of their ethnic background.

Latin, Mediterranean and Asian flavors have been the top three ethnic cuisines for many years. Micro cuisines from all of these regions of the world continue to emerge in surveys of chefs year after year. Just a few years ago, a Y-Pulse study of middle school students indicated that 30% never ate Chinese or Mexican food although classic Italian foods like spaghetti and pasta were among the top scoring favorites.

The momentum for micro cuisines from the big three regions continues to build. Latin inspiration is hotter than ever and even the youngest students in K-12 are asking for hot sauce. South American cuisines from Ecuador and Peru are becoming popular because of the diversity of agricultural products from tropical fruits to cocoa and coffee. Foods from the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa are gaining interest. Olive oil, dates, exotic flavors like za'atar and simple sea salt are classic ingredients in some of these foods. Asian noodle bowls and barbecue have become the global comfort food with flavors from all over Asia.

There is no denying the appeal of classic American comfort food among all consumers. What's new is how some of the ethnic flavors are finding their way into mainstream American menu items.

Food with a Conscience

When college students were asked about the factors that are most important when buying food and beverages, the top three factors were a simple ingredient statement, a company known for ethical practices and sustainability.

Young consumers are active and in charge of their food choices. They want food from companies they trust to deliver nourishing, great tasting food with respect for those who produce it.

Y-Pulse reviewed original research and roundtable discussions with leading foodservice directors in K-12 and college and university foodservice and young consumers over the past 10 years to identify the enduring trends that are shaping the foodservice industry today.