

CAMPUS LIFE PROVIDES INSIGHT AND INSPIRATION FOR DELI OPERATOR

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The deli is an important element of college food culture whether it is on campus, around the corner or in a local supermarket or convenience store. What is captivating today's students provides a glimpse into the expectations of young adult consumers.

The recent National Association of College and University Food Services (NACUFS) meeting in Spokane, Washington gathered leading foodservice professionals in the segment to discuss what's on the minds of these demanding and influential customers. Following are some key takeaways from the conference sessions and campus tours particularly relevant for deli operations.

MAINSTREAM VEG-CENTRIC MENUS

The consumer of tomorrow is a decided omnivorous and even the most voracious carnivores will say they would like to eat more vegetables. Vegan and vegetarian offerings that are satisfying and delicious attract a wide range of customers. Although manufacturers of processed vegetable proteins that mimic meat are investing heavily in capturing this generation of consumers, veg-centric menus featuring whole plant foods are where today's menus are trending.

ON DEMAND EXPERIENCES

Young consumers are weary of the compromises they have been forced to make during the recent couple of years due to pandemic driven supply and labor shortages. Many of the innovations that were accelerated during the pandemic are here to stay assuring on demand satisfaction when it comes to food and menu items.

Food trucks are delivering more than specialty prepared foods and authentic ethnic items. Some have become mobile convenience stores tailoring their product mix to micro target customers. Ghost kitchens and food lockers are further enabling on demand satisfaction for today's consumers.

GLOBALLY INSPIRED DINING

The continuing difficulties of international travel have become a boon for globally

inspired menus that offer the satisfaction of culinary exploration right at home. Delivering an authentic international experience may be a challenge; however using existing kitchen equipment can deliver complex international flavors in a bowl or a wrap with ease. Partnering with local independent restaurants with unique international menu items that are suited for the deli is another great way to deliver an authentic experience.

ALLERGEN AWARENESS

Today's college students are reporting allergies and sensitivities at an increasing rate and some campuses have responded with branded allergen free operations that are proving to be incredibly popular with the general student body. Dedicated kitchens and service areas are offering up a wide range of items that do not include any of the top 8 to 10 allergens. This approach makes it more efficient than dealing with allergies to individual ingredients one at a time. It also allows the culinary creative staff to focus on creating a tempting array of healthful and flavorful offerings.

TECH DRIVEN EFFICIENCY

Tech-driven innovation that enabled survival in recent years has raised the basic expectations for technology that enables food experiences. Robot deliveries are no longer a stop-and-stare-at-it novelty as they have become more widely used in selected marketing areas. Young adult consumers expect the world at their fingertips especially when it comes to food.

THE MODERN DELI EXPERIENCE

In the constantly evolving business environment unlikely partnerships have emerged. For example, campus meal plans that traditionally focused on keeping students on campus now include local eateries and supermarkets to make the plans more appealing to students on campus. The toughest competition for a campus can be the local supermarket. Touring the construction for a new convenience store operation on one campus, the new store was described as corner bodega meets organic and specialty food market.

STRATEGIC "SHRINKFLATION"

The idea of shrinking packages in the grocery aisle has become a notable topic of discussion related to inflation and today's economic pressures. Yet when it comes to foodservice offerings, stable consumer pricing requires adjustments in portions sizes and composition of some dishes. It can be easier for the deli to add value while managing food cost by featuring seasonal ingredients that make it possible to provide an affordable option that delivers delight rather than disappointment to customers.

MINDFUL MERCHANDISING

Supply chain issues and labor shortages have meant reduced offerings in many operations. Yet, merchandising that is mindful of the local audience can highlight items that communicate value to customers. Merchandising also serves to enhance the in-store shopping experience and stimulate impulse purchases. Shopper research shows that a majority of customers who use click and collect on-line ordering often come into the store to complete their total shop with specialty items that might not have made it onto their regular shopping list. Creating surprise and delight with in-store merchandising can build business and customer satisfaction.

The visionary leaders that spoke at this conference shared their perspectives on the importance of creating a culture of innovation and readiness for the future. An important aspect of community building - coming together over a shared meal experience - has been missed and young adults are hungry for a community with personal interaction.

The final words shared with conference attendees were a call to action to "get ready for Generation Alpha." Although they are ten years old and younger, it is important to understand that they have spent much time during their formative years in a pandemic centric culture. Expect them to be more tech-savvy than today's Gen Z and ready to create their own food story. **DB**

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