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Why Grocery Shoppers Do Not Use Supermarket Food-Service

Forrest Stegelin

In the past decade, grocery shoppers have observed larger store footprints of grocery stores as retailers attempted to be a one-stop convenience shopping site, complete with food-service (delicatessens, bakeries, wine shops) and non-food-oriented (banks, pharmacies, florists) businesses. Data indicate that consumer expenditures for ready-to-eat meals and eating away from home increased during the 1990s and 2000s, which suggests that grocery chains made the right decisions as to square footage, floor planning, and layout.

The past couple of years have witnessed a shift in food-service purchases from eating away from home at restaurants to purchasing meal components to prepare at home or some retention of purchasing read-to-eat meals for eating at home, bucking the earlier trend where supermarkets faced more competition for the consumer's food dollar from other food-service businesses than ever before. So why are consumers apparently ambivalent, according to grocers, about the deli department in the supermarket for ready-to-eat prepared meals, meats, sandwiches, salads, side-dishes, casseroles, and desserts?

Undergraduate students in Food & Fiber Marketing surveyed grocery shoppers in the Athens, GA vicinity to identify traits/characteristics of take-out shoppers and why the grocery stores were not their first choice for take-home meals. Only one in five shoppers considers the supermarket most often when looking for take-out food. Nearly one-third acknowledge they do buy ready-to-eat meals from the supermarket, but because they pass by the deli while in the grocery store shopping for meal ingredients and components and the convenience tempts them. Take-out from fast-food to white-tablecloth restaurants still ranks first with consumers for convenient meals; home-cooking is still the top preference and activity for nearly one-quarter of grocery shoppers.

Three types of "take-out" customers were identified: the "generalist" or "family-shopper;" the "up-markets" or "gourmet shoppers;" and the "value-added" or "health-conscious shoppers." For the generalist, time is the biggest cost; they prefer food-service to cooking (time and fatigue) and purchase assortment, value, and quantity over quality. The up-markets are shopping for the unique; different ethnic foods or unusual ingredients; and single-serving or portion-control packages. They will pay premium prices, are sensually stimulated, and have culinary expertise but reserve cooking for special occasions. The value-added actually prefer to cook (food-safety concerns) but lack time and energy; they seek low-fat, low-salt, low-carbohydrate, and high-fiber products, but still seek taste and excitement in eating, and are characterized by reversion to the mean in terms of extremes.

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