

MARKETING PERSPECTIVE

Cashing In On Cook & Carry



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The fresh revolution coupled with consumers' desire for convenience should favor the deli as much as it favors the produce department. Just when we think we have the consumer value proposition nailed, a new category emerges — Meal Assembly Centers (MACs) — where consumers gather to prepare a week's worth of meals.

The Easy Meal Prep Association [Cheyenne, WY] says there were 284 U. S. meal prep companies with 775 outlets as of May 2006. We wanted to know

more about these centers and to learn how supermarket delis might tap into this multiple-meal solution opportunity. So we interviewed consumers and sent our staff out to report on the experience first hand.

There are several trends driving this phenomenon.

Convenience — The press talks about the MAC experience of parties and complimentary wine, but the consumers we spoke with said the convenience was the big benefit.

Without exception, consumers loved the idea of assembling a meal, walking away from the mess and leaving it for someone else to clean up. Some MACs even offer fully prepared refrigerated or frozen meals for the really time-starved. Local advertising and good websites make these centers easy to find, but most of our consumers learned about their favorite MAC from friends.

Entertainment — When we asked consumers about the experience, we were told, "The experience definitely adds value, but the convenience is unbeatable." We were also told, "It's fun to pretend like you're on a cooking show."

Emotional Satisfaction — The emotional gratification of having a hand in preparing a meal is a benefit for consumers. Most noted they felt this food was fresher and more healthful than frozen dinners or restaurant food. They liked being in control and able to use more or less seasoning to their own taste to satisfy their family. Incredibly clean and inviting facilities added to the appeal.

Nutrition — Consumers told us nutrition was an afterthought. However, fresh ingredients and mostly baked or grilled entrées provided a halo of healthfulness.

Value — Most consumers looked at MACs as an alternative to restaurants or takeout, so a per-serving cost of up to \$3.50 for an entrée seemed reasonable. All noted it was more expensive than cooking at home, but not having to clean up was a huge time saver. Most noted side dishes were suggested but not included so additional shopping and planning were required.

Variety — Classic comfort foods with an interesting twist appeal to consumers. They talked about pork chops made with red wine, dried cranberries and raisins, ingredi-

ents they would not usually have at home. Others talked about spices and rubs they would not typically purchase.

MACs appeal most to mainstream consumers with families outside of city centers in major metropolitan areas. Our suburban and rural consumers thought the concept was great because they were still cooking, but it was easier. These were not consumers without cooking skills.

In one secondary market, the franchisee told of a customer with no cooking skills at all who had to be guided through every step. The staff was happy to give cooking lessons to gain loyalty.

Urban consumers noted a wide variety of independent ethnic restaurants where great takeout can be had for less than the cost of a QSR meal. Limited freezer space and a myriad of easily available culinary choices made MACs far less alluring.

We interviewed some major supermarkets to find out what they thought of these new competitors and if any had planned a response. Although familiar with MACs, none had planned a specific response. Most simply answered, "Well, our customers could buy a few rotisserie chicken meals."

That is a wake-up call for our industry. No matter how great your rotisserie chicken meal is, the ante just got higher.

Consumers asked how they might feel about this kind of service from their favorite supermarket did not seem to think it would work. Reasons included the isolated physical space and sanitation requirements that made them feel comfortable in a meal assembly center.

Here are few things to consider to respond to your time-starved customers' needs for convenience, value and variety and to get your share of the meal solution business.

- **Re-engineered physical space** — If you have space to run consumer cooking classes, think how easily some might become do-it-yourself dinner solutions with the introduction of some stainless steel prep tables on wheels.

- **Chef-inspired ethnic meals** — If you have a chef or use local chefs as resources, think how you can take advantage of their expertise and ability to work with your customers. For example, your customers might enjoy taking home a week's worth of Mediterranean fare they prepare in your store with your chef's supervision.

- **Sensational sides** — Fill the gap in what MACs do not offer — complete meal solutions with sides. Put together the entire package for your customers in the deli. Do not ask them to shop the entire store to pick up sides and salads to accompany their creation.

There is no one in a better position to satisfy consumer needs for freshness, value and variety than the supermarket deli. It is worth a few minutes to think about how you might want to add some entertainment to the mix and build your business. **DB**

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