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# The end of the meal as we know it? Half of eating occasions now snacks, says Hartman

By Elaine WATSON , 04-Feb-2014  
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No idea what, when or where you're likely to be eating later? Eating on the go half the time? Grazing throughout the day? You're not alone.

According to a new report from trendwatcher Hartman Group, half of eating occasions in the US are now snacks, or mini meals, as more

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consumers “eat on the fly, based on whims and craving”.

Meanwhile, almost half (47%) of eating occasions take place when people are on their own.

#### Consumers decide when and what to eat spontaneously

Although Americans still talk about ‘snacks’ in food surveys, “*what they are often describing are mini-meals, and many people eat those types of meals throughout the day instead of traditional meal,*” says Hartman Group in its report ‘*Modern Eating: Cultural Roots, Daily Behaviors*’.

And increasingly, they are also deciding when and what to eat spontaneously, in part because everyone - from the local c-store to the Panera on the way home from work, IKEA or the deli counter at Kroger - is now competing for their food dollars, it points out.

*“In the past, food was available in a limited range of places, such as restaurants and grocery stores. Shifts in lifestyles, and thus eating and food culture, have brought a wider range of food into many more locations, from IKEA to Costco Wholesale to forward-thinking convenience stores.”*

**Almost half (47%) of eating occasions take place when people are alone**

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But given that more people are looking for a snack/mini meal rather than a full-blown dinner, what is the best portion size to offer?

It depends, but having multiple options is critical, says Hartman. “*About half the time, consumers eat alone, which increases the need for smaller portions. That trend is not likely to reverse, in part because people have come to enjoy eating alone.*”

*“They see it as a way to catch up on work, reading and television programs and to nourish themselves without having to wait for family members who are going in all different directions.”*

**Consumers want “interesting, less processed food in smaller packages that can be eaten on the go”.**

And companies that offer more choices are appealing to consumers that want to grab something reasonably substantial and go, it adds.



Consumers want “interesting, less processed food in smaller packages that can be eaten on the go”.

*“Some companies, notably certain fast-food and fast casual chains, including Chipotle and Panera Bread, understand consumers’ changing needs and offer hand-held mini-meals, side salads and half-orders of soup and sandwiches.”*

In a nutshell, says Hartman, consumers want “*interesting, less processed food in smaller packages that can be eaten on the go.*”

**Consumers eat ‘on the go’ while sitting at home**

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But what does eating on the go actually mean? Dashboard dining? Eating a cereal bar on the train?

*"Increasingly, consumers eat 'on the go' while actually sitting at home,"* observes Hartman Group.

*That is, they stop by a restaurant or retailer for a bite, then take it home to eat, sometimes in combination with items in their refrigerators or from other retailers.*

*"They often eat meals that way when they don't have time or energy to think about preparing something themselves and when they want something tasty or a meal with simple, real ingredients but are not going to cook it themselves.*

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