

Future Forecast: The Consumer of the Future with Melissa Abbott of the Hartman Group

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Q&A with Melissa Abbott, The Hartman Group

“We are so much more aware as a general population of what we’re eating. We’re reconnecting with our food and its origins,” says Melissa Abbott, the director of culinary insights at the Hartman Group, headquartered in Bellevue, Wash. “We’re all participating at a level that is much more proactive than reactive, as it used to be. Just imagine 10 years from now. It’s only going to increase.”

Abbott has authored almost a decade of annual Hartman reports on trends in the food industry, based on sales data, national retail audits and menu tracking, and quantitative and qualitative consumer research, including focus groups and shop-alongs. She has witnessed the shift from American consumers tapping into specialty food as an occasional indulgence to, today, consumers trading up with their food choices for everyday occasions, primarily out of a sense of adventure and a desire to make better choices for health and wellness.



One of the trends you’re spotting is consumers making food choices to support optimal wellness. Haven’t we already seen healthy eating rising in importance over the past several years?

We’re just scratching the surface right now. Whether they are looking to their own more personal genetics or what’s right for them to eat, consumers are personalizing their diets. Modern wellness and life-hacking go hand-in-hand. People don’t talk about dieting anymore. The question will be, what’s the optimal thing I can do for myself today? It’s not just about food, but about supplements, ingredients, exercise, sleep, and what all this means for our long-term health, and how well we age. We impact our microbiome with the foods and beverages we drink. We’re going to learn so much more about the microbiome and digestion in the next decade, and what ingredients work for us and don’t work for us, individually.

The trend for anticipating optimal wellness is only going to continue around customization. How you ate when you were 25 is not how you are going to eat when you’re 42. Your body is going to demand different things than what your sister, your friend, or your colleague are eating.

In the past five years we’ve seen greater insistence on transparency in clean labels and the supply chain. Have we reached the apex of this movement?

No, this participation will only continue to increase to a very great degree. It's a millennial-minded approach to food production and consumption. This generation is much more involved than ever before; there's been a deep shift away from the old version of consumerism. Consumers today are vociferous in how they think the brands and the food they eat should be produced, grown, and marketed to them.

What issues will be highlighted by this increased attention?

Edible ethics and eco-social movements, water usage, fair trade, the prioritization of ugly produce, and sustainability concerns, like bees being placed on the endangered species list, are all issues the consumer of the future will care about. What we're also seeing more of is that 'clean' labels are not just about the ingredients themselves. They're about how we are treating and taking care of the people who grow and prepare our food. This kind of attention started off with animal welfare, and now we're experiencing it closer to home. Within the next 10 years, there will be more consumer interest in people who are behind the scenes of food production, who are struggling in many ways to make a living and take care of their families.

Your research has outlined a trend of valuing time. How will this affect how consumers get the food they want?

The most expensive thing for all of us is time. How do we outsource clean menu items, and chef-driven prepared foods in a mindful way? Companies like Thrive, a natural premium food delivery service, are catering more toward clean ingredient panels; they're vetting all the products and are capturing the attention of a lot of shoppers. Consumers are shopping more frequently—something we only anticipate to continue and grow.

We're also going to see delivery of semi-prepared and fully prepared food become more streamlined, and it's all going to be about technology, not about the people who are preparing the food. Especially in urban areas, the delivery is not going to be by the food industry, but by the Amazons and Googles of the world. At one of our focus groups, a millennial said he fully expects to have a drone deliver him a hamburger in the next year.

In addition to consumers seeking new ways to save time, have you noticed new trends in eating patterns?

Our research is showing that Americans are eating alone more than ever before. This used to be something we weren't very excited about as a culture. Now we enjoy it unapologetically. As one focus-group participant said, "I love it when my boyfriend is on a work trip and I can eat whatever I want." Eating alone is not about catering to the other person, or meeting in the middle. It's starting to become this "me" time rather than sad time. No one is going to infringe on us. It's another area where consumers are seeking greater customization in the food culture.

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Robin Pforr Ryan is an Albany, New York-based journalist and speechwriter with a background in newspapers and law.