

Snacking 2.0

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Full Text:

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Consumers are taking their snacking very seriously these days.

Not too long ago, snacks were viewed as a treat or reward, but increasingly consumers are seeking snacks that fulfill a dietary need or preference. Snacks have evolved to become something between a meal and a nutritional supplement.

Almost all snacking - 80%, according to The Hartman Group's "Modern Eating: Cultural Roots, Daily Behaviors" report - is done with a purpose.

"People are being much more deliberate about their choices, with an emphasis on foods and beverages that aid in providing balanced nutrition, energy, digestion, protein and weight management," says Melissa Abbott, VP, Hartman Retainer Services at The Hartman Group, Bellevue, Wash. "So, consumers are gravitating toward snacks that provide fiber, whole grains and protein."

In addition, she said, consumers are also seeking products that "intersect with diet trends" such as paleo, gluten-free, raw and vegan.

Manufacturers have responded with snack-food innovations that center around both nutrition and new and interesting flavors.

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"New products like turmeric juice satisfy [consumers'] desires to have something healthy while allowing them to try a different flavor profile," said Abbott, noting that consumers are "increasingly interested" in consuming beverages as snacks.

She said many of the innovative snack products on the market are using emerging ingredients, such as alternative and plant-based proteins - insects, pulses and legumes, for example.

"Beverages that offer a range of health characteristics are also increasingly interesting," Abbott said, citing as examples botanical-infused or mini-smoothies.

"Mini-meals positioned as snacks are also increasingly innovative in terms of packaging and ingredients," she added.

Stephanie Steiner, Seattle-based director of sales and marketing at Unified Grocers' Market Centre Natural and Signature Brands, said "clean" protein snacks have become an emerging trend in snack innovation, with products that include Epic brand meat snack bars, Tanka meat bars and sticks, and Country Archer Jerky.

Another key trend she cited in healthy snack innovation is the Non-GMO Project Verified seal being placed on traditionally genetically modified snacks, including popcorn, tortilla chips and corn chips.

While consumers may be shunning additives and GMOs, they have become accepting of fats, Steiner said, "as long as they come from healthy sources.

"Nuts and coconut aren't going to scare anyone the way they did during the dismal 'low-fat years.'"

Replacing carbs

Jodi Weeber, a dietitian at the New Hope, Minn., Hy-Vee supermarket, said she's seen more snack foods with added nutritional benefits from unique sources of protein and superfoods.

The carbohydrates, sugar and fat that have long characterized snack foods "are now being replaced by ingredients with increased protein, fiber and vitamin/mineral content," she said.

Weeber suggested that sampling provides one of the best ways to increase customer exposure to new snack products.

"We love to give our customers a 'try before you buy' experience, whether that be through a stand-alone demonstration in the store or in conjunction with an in-store event," she said. "New products, especially items that customers are not familiar with, can be intimidating. Our goal is to have customers try the product, educate them on the nutritional benefits and background on how it's made, and tell them how they can utilize it in their daily diet."

Weeber was one of three Hy-Vee dietitians to provide feedback to SN for this article.

Hailey Boudreau, a dietitian at the Ankeny, Iowa, Prairie Trail Hy-Vee, said the flood of snack foods high in protein includes "nuts, protein bars, protein powders, shelf stable meat/meat alternatives and peanut butters."

"You can now buy pancakes with protein powder, powdered peanut butter, turkey and soy jerky and yogurt-covered nuts," she said.

At the same time, manufacturers are introducing new products with "fun and unique flavors," Boudreau said, citing chili lime jerky, strawberry cheesecake protein bars, sweet and spicy tuna packets, and banana cream protein powder as examples.

She said she often encourages shoppers to snack sensibly.

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"Most people no longer sit down to eat three meals a day, so I am constantly recommending healthy snacking," said Boudreau. "I talk about healthy snacks and trends during my in-store cooking classes and presentations in the community.

"Making unique trail mix recipes, recommending powdered peanut butter in smoothies and showing how you can make mini-barbeque tuna sandwiches on the go are just some of the ways I teach customers how to include healthy snacking into their everyday lives," she said.

Amber Groeling, a dietitian at the Topeka, Kan., Hy-Vee noted that several manufacturers have come out with multiple product lines in which one line may use non-nutritive sweeteners, while another line may use a minimal amount of sugar.

She noted that she calls attention to snack bars that contain high levels of protein and fiber and low levels of sugar with a "Dietitian's Choice" tag.

"Protein has been shown to help with satiety and weight control, so it makes it easy to promote and merchandise snacks that offer a healthy dose of protein," she said.

Groeling's store also has an area in its HealthMarket section dedicated to roasted pulses, which she said have been growing in popularity.

"I recommend them as healthy alternatives to chips," she said.

Rethinking every category

Steiner of Unified said retailers need to think about the new ways people are snacking when they consider their merchandising strategies.

"Instead of simply expanding their snack sets, retailers need to look at every single food schematic and ask themselves how snacking plays a role in the category," she said. "This includes service departments.

"Then they can consider new ways to meet demands, stimulate impulse sale, and build their own profit with tie-ins, messaging and perhaps sets-within-sets or new adjacencies."

For example, because consumers are likely to eat energy bars on the go in place of cereal, retailers should consider positioning bars next to cereal, said Steiner.

Abbott of The Hartman Group, said retailers need to recognize that snacks are becoming increasingly diverse, "in both definition and from the perspective of physical, emotional, and social drivers."

"Find ways to speak to all these needs with products including, and far beyond, the salted snack aisle," she said.

Abbott suggested one way to do this is to create destinations.

"Develop focal points in-store where consumers can find product solutions and ideas for needs and desires emerging from modern eating culture," she said. "So, something like snacking endcaps that feature an array of snack-able foods and beverages ranging from packaged, bottled and fresh, to mini-meals."

Defining 'health'

Steiner of Unified Grocers noted that is important to remember that consumers might all define "healthy eating" differently.

"One consumer may prefer organic, but still enjoy high carbohydrates," she said. "Another might opt for free-range jerky."

Suppliers are meeting consumer demands for more healthful snack formulations in part by making acquisitions, Steiner noted.

"Larger manufacturers of legacy brands no longer take small upstarts for granted," she said. "Category growth is coming from their innovation. Often, they bring innovation on board by acquiring smaller companies."

"No one considered kale a viable snack until Brad's [Raw Foods] made it into chips," said Steiner. "Eight years ago, few of us considered kale at all."

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Among other new snack innovations are Dang chips in coconut and onion varieties, she said.

Steiner is also a fan of Zing Nutrition Bars, a line developed by nutritionists.

"Zing Bars hasn't gotten enough attention," she said. "But the ingredient upgrades are fantastic, the flavor never disappoints, and the new items each year are always spot-on."

Exemplifying many of the latest snack trends, Stoneridge Orchards, a line of premium dried fruits from Royal Ridge Fruits, Royal City, Wash., recently rolled out to all Walmart locations in the U.S. The line includes 4-ounce and 5-ounce bags of dried fruit in varieties such as Chili Lime Cherries, Dark Chocolate Dipped Strawberries, Blueberries Dipped in Greek Yogurt, Organic Montmorency Cherries, and Organic Blueberries.

"We are seeing a significant shift in the way people think - they're becoming more cognizant of what's on a label and are avoiding complex ingredients," said Bryce Dorsing, VP of marketing and sales, Royal Ridge Fruits.

Sidebar: Shifts in snacking behavior

The role of snacking has evolved to become more health-oriented, more savory and less sweet, said Darren Seifer, food and beverage industry analyst at research firm NPD Group, Port Washington, N.Y.

He noted that consumers in general seem to be relegating sweet snacking to the evenings, when they may have lost their focus on healthy eating and instead are allowing themselves to indulge.

Between-meal snacks, meanwhile, have become a logical vehicle for consumers seeking to increase protein consumption.

"We've noted for a while that a little more than half of adults say they are trying to get more protein into their diets, and dinner is when we typically get the most protein, with a center-of-the-plate entree," said Seifer. "So people may be looking at other dayparts, including snacking, to achieve that goal."

In addition to a shift toward more healthful snacking, snack foods are also increasingly being consumed as part of a main meal, NPD's research has revealed. About a quarter of snacks are now eaten with a meal, he said, compared with 20% previously.

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Packaged for portability

Innovative packaging has been helping drive healthy snacking.

"Products that never used to be portable now are, making them viable for snacking away from home," said Stephanie Steiner, Seattle-based director of sales and marketing at Unified Grocers' Market Centre Natural and Signature Brands.

She cited Justin's as an example, noting that the company was the first to market nut butter in a small squeeze pouch.

Melissa Abbott, VP, Hartman Retainer Services at The Hartman Group, Bellevue, Wash., agreed that packaging has been one aspect of snack-product innovation.

"With increasing snack consumption, consumers are in general downsizing portions, not experience," she said. "So, brands are offering mini-servings and smaller packages that can stand alone or can mix and match, allowing consumers to achieve a desired nutrition profile, quantity or variety."

Consumer are also satisfying their need for portable nutrition options with bars, nuts, and both fresh and dried fruits and vegetables, said Abbott.

New Products: Fancy Food Show

aGaea Organic Snack Olives

Gaea's Organic Olive Snack Packs come in Halkidiki Green Olives and Kalamata Olives varieties. They are 100% natural, with no additives or preservatives and low salinity, according to Gaea. The olives are packed in a resealable package without liquid so they can be enjoyed later. Each 65-gram pack contains 67 or 150 calories.

aSetton International Farms'Pistachio Berry Blend

Setton International Farms' new Pistachio Berry Blend combines California pistachios with tart cherries and cranberries, fresh roasted almonds, cashews, and creamy white chips.

Seven SundaysMuesli Squares

These on-the-go breakfast and snack bars come in Blueberry Lemon & Chia, Banana Toasted Pecan, and Cocoa Pumpkin Seed varieties. Each 2-oz. square contains a full serving of 100% whole grain oats and is boosted with nuts and seeds for protein, and real fruits, pressed together with sunflower seed butter, coconut oil, date paste and organic honey.