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Forecasting the future of snacking

March 7, 2017 - by Monica Watrous

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Snacking now accounts for half of all eating occasions.

BELLEVUE, WASH. — Snacking, now accounting for half of all eating occasions, is driven by three primary consumer needs: nourishment, optimization and pleasure. Understanding attitudes and approaches to snacking based on these drivers is critical as manufacturers and retailers navigate “the modern era of snackified eating,” said Tamara Barnett, vice-president of strategic insights for The Hartman Group.

“Snacking is not just an interesting phenomenon of consumer behavior ... it really is a crucial demand space for product and marketing development and strategic portfolio planning,” Ms. Barnett said during a Feb. 28 webinar presentation detailing findings of recent research about snacking behaviors.

Of the 91% of consumers who report snacking multiple times throughout the day, 8% forgo meals altogether in favor of all-day snacking. Time pressures and commitments, as well as the decline of meal planning and cooking skills, have upended traditional daily food rituals.

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Ninety-one per cent of consumers report snacking multiple times throughout the day. “How we go about planning, acquiring and consuming food has been disrupted, and the result of that disruption has been in many cases the displacement of meals and a lot of variation in when and how and what gets consumed,” Ms. Barnett said.

An elevated focus on food and beverage for nutrition and a growing interest in global flavors have fueled an evolution in snacking behaviors and preferences, Ms. Barnett said.

“Snacking was about diversion and fun before,” she said, indicating a more recent shift toward health and wellness, fresh and premium. “The food industry has responded to this desire for fresh and minimally processed food and beverages, and there has been a proliferation of small, premium quality brands that are now competing with those larger legacy brands.”



Fifty-six per cent of all snacking occasions reflect some need for nourishment. As the line between meal and snack becomes increasingly blurry, the three main drivers for snacking occasions provide “coherence to the messiness of snacking” and may help manufacturers, marketers and retailers understand consumer challenges and identify opportunities, Ms. Barnett said.

Fifty-six per cent of all snacking occasions reflect some need for nourishment, or snacking that addresses hunger and provides sustained energy. Key attributes of these snacks



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include whole grains, fiber, protein, fat, probiotics and minimal sugar, Ms. Barnett said. Examples include Greek yogurt, fruits and vegetables, nut and granola bars, and ready-to-drink tea, water and smoothies.

Thirty-four per cent of snacking occasions reflect some need for optimization, or snacking that provides quick energy, recovery, mental focus or stress management, such as products with protein, caffeine, vitamins and minerals, antioxidants and botanicals. Examples include energy and sports drinks, energy and granola bars, meat snacks, kombucha and coffee.



Thirty-four per cent of snacking occasions reflect some need for optimization.

Forty-nine per cent of snacking occasions reflect some need for pleasure, or snacking that fulfills a desire for craving, comfort, indulgence and reward. Examples include chocolate and candy, baked goods, ice cream, chips and popcorn and carbonated soft drinks.

Snacking drivers change across the day. Snacking for nourishment is more prominent in the morning, when consumers are more likely to choose fruit or nutrition bars to satisfy hunger. In the evenings, consumers tend to snack for pleasure, indulging in after-dinner candy, ice cream or salty snacks.

“Snacking has become a highly customized activity for consumers,” Ms. Barnett said.



Forty-nine per cent of snacking occasions reflect some need for pleasure. But while snacking has become a solution for many, it may also serve as a source of tension, she said.

“Consumers may see snacking as an unhealthy emotional crutch or potential trap,” she said.

Twenty-two per cent of snacking is aimless, driven by boredom, unrelated to hunger and often followed by guilt and regret. Food and beverage companies should recognize their roles in creating as well as resolving these tensions, Ms. Barnett said.

“Consider how your snacking offerings can mitigate some of the concerns that they (consumers) have about imbalance or overconsumption or aimlessness, and continue to create offerings that satisfy those desires for nourishment and optimization and pleasure, but while also being practical.”



Snacks should be developed to deliver on the increasing need for nourishment, optimization or pleasure on the go.

Additionally, snacks should be developed to deliver on the increasing need for nourishment, optimization or pleasure on the go.

“Consider not only how package design can simplify on-the-go user experiences but even how the product itself can really enable a mobile lifestyle,” Ms. Barnett said.

Finally, she said, the future of snacking will fully embrace freshness. Retailers and manufacturers alike should consider offering a product mix that reflects the desire for fresh but also recognizes the role for iconic and more processed favorites, she said.

“Think about fresh expectations that consumers now have when it comes to snacks,” Ms. Barnett said. “Does your product formulation as well as all aspects of... the product signal contemporary notions of freshness and quality, or does it need to revamped?”

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