

Meals 2026:

Occasions, Needs and Constraints

A Hartman Group syndicated research study

Fielding July 2026
U.S. market coverage

Understanding the needs, constraints and trade-offs that shape modern meal occasions

Consumers are no longer following traditional meal structures. They're assembling foods and beverages from a portfolio of solutions—including whole ingredients, center-store shortcuts, frozen and fresh prepared foods and foodservice—while also balancing time, cost and competing needs. Categories and brands that once “owned” mealtime are losing ground. But amidst this cultural reframing, food and beverage companies have the opportunity to serve as solutions to daily constraints rather than simply providers of products.

To understand this opportunity, meals must be viewed through the needs they fulfill—not the dayparts they occupy. Today's eating occasions are shaped by motivations like efficiency and control, nourishment and functionality, connection and experience, indulgence and enjoyment. These needs influence what counts as a meal, how much effort consumers are willing to invest and which solutions ultimately get a seat at the table.

The traditional meal journey is also evolving. Rather than following a linear path from planning to shopping to cooking, consumers increasingly begin with a simple question: **What do I need right now—and how much time or energy do I have?** From there, decisions cascade across planning, procurement and preparation. Among these stages, **preparation** has become the critical inflection point, shaping where consumers turn for solutions and how meals come together.

This study is for:

- CPG brands defending or expanding mealtime relevance
- Retailers positioning as meal solution destinations
- Foodservice competing for everyday occasions
- Brands adjacent to meals (snacks, beverages, components)

These insights help:

- Identify growth opportunities by need state
- Defend against occasion erosion (to snacks)
- Optimize portfolio and positioning
- Strengthen value messaging in a high-cost environment
- Align innovation and renovation with real consumer behavior

Uncover the full ecosystem of planning, sourcing, preparation and eating

Drawing on a nationally representative online survey, digital ethnography, in-depth qualitative interviews and a proprietary database of more than 215,000 adult eating and drinking occasions, *Meals 2026* will provide a multidimensional view of evolving mealtime habits:

What drives meal decisions today?

- The role of scratch cooking, assembly and shortcuts
- How consumers are navigating trade-offs around time, effort and cost

What needs are meals fulfilling?

- The core emotional, functional and situational drivers shaping modern meals, explored through a proprietary needs-based framework
- How and why specific needs align with specific solutions (CPG, retail, foodservice)

Where are consumers sourcing their meals?

- Retail vs. foodservice vs. hybrid solutions
- How in-store offerings shape meals: perimeter, center store, frozen, ready-to-eat, fresh-prepared

What does “value” mean at mealtime?

- How consumers evaluate value beyond price: quality, relevance, quantity, convenience, experience
- How to communicate value on meal occasions

How are meals competing with snacks?

- When and why meals are replaced by snacks
- Where snacks are gaining share—and where meals maintain relevance
- Opportunities to defend, reclaim or expand occasions

78%

dinner occasions involving the need "not needing time or energy to prep"

AND...

36%

involve the need "not many steps needed"

Meals 2026 is your strategic advantage:

- A systematic view of meals
- Actionable insights across channels, with tailored implications for CPG manufacturers, retailers and foodservice operators
- Grounded in real consumer needs, aspirations and constraints
- Built around the realities shaping everyday food decisions:
 - Time pressure
 - Budget limitations
 - Decision fatigue

Gain primary consumer insights with actionable guidance to inform your strategy—without the financial or time investments of custom research

Robust integrated methodology

Quantitative research: Nationally representative online survey of U.S. food shoppers aged 18-80, with a minimum total sample of n=2,000 and readable samples of demographic audiences such as generational cohorts, race/ethnicity and income tiers. Insights from Hartman Group's proprietary **Compass Eating & Drinking Occasions Database** will provide additional nuance.

Qualitative research: Multi-day engagement (journaling, prompts, photos and videos) with demographically and regionally diverse consumers. Research will involve a dynamic online qualitative research platform paired with in-depth, virtual interviews with a subset of participants.

Cultural analysis: Literature review of marketing, consumer publications and discourse in food and beverage sourcing; engagement with writings/podcasts by cultural informants; social listening on key consumer platforms.

Final report available September 30, 2026

Report Price: \$12,500* (until 9/30/2026; \$15,000 starting 10/1/2026)

****report is included in all Hartman Retainer Services packages***

An **in-depth PowerPoint** report will include a complete analysis of all relevant data supported by robust charts and visuals, plus strategic implications and recommendations. Consumer quotes will add real-world context throughout.

A standalone **Executive Report** (included with the purchase) will provide a concise, strategic summary of the full report for internal stakeholders.

Detailed **Excel data tables** will accompany the report, enabling flexible analysis with key demographic breakdowns.

Proprietary categories, questions and/or custom data cuts may be available. Requests are handled on a first-come, first-served basis. Contact us by 6/19/2026 for a quote and feasibility assessment.

Turning insights into action: Activation Sessions

Please contact Melissa Abbott to learn more about how you can take your strategy to the next level with the insights from the *Meals 2026* report:

melissa@hartman-group.com.

Pre-order the *Meals 2026* report now

To purchase, please email: melissa@hartman-group.com

Melissa Abbott

VP Syndicated Studies

O: 425.452.0818



ABOUT HARTMAN GROUP

Our mission is to translate consumer behavior and food culture into strategic growth opportunities for our clients. Since 1989, Hartman Group's anthropologists, social scientists and business analysts have been immersed in the study of American food and beverage culture, using ethnographic observation, quantitative tracking surveys and deeply studying trends. What we have learned and continue to uncover allows us to upend many notions of our traditional American eating and drinking patterns, identifying unique opportunities and winning strategies for our clients.

3150 Richards Road, Ste. 200 Bellevue, WA 98005

Tel (425) 452 0818

www.hartman-group.com