

Grab-and-Go Becoming the New Norm in Dining

Operators may overlook a chance to increase sales and cut labor costs

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With the average American's workplace lunchtime down to 31 minutes and more than half of employees eating at their desks according to recent surveys, it isn't surprising that ready-to-go foods are becoming an increasingly important component of corporate dining services.

One hundred percent of corporate dining service operators in a survey conducted by *FoodService Director* say they offer takeout food, and that it represents nearly a third of their total sales. No wonder. A survey by Impulse Research found 58% of adults say they eat lunch at their desks while continuing to work. Among college dining services, 90% of those surveyed offer take-out, representing 24% of their sales, *FSD* reported.

Customer Demand

The primary reason for the offering "portable food?" Operators told the magazine customer demand (60%), a larger customer base (43%) and labor savings (17%). (Multiple response were permitted.)

The trend to eating on the run isn't confined to on-site dining centers. Convenience stores, supermarkets and "big box" retailers like Wal-Mart are seeing increased sales of ready-to-go foods. Even barbecue stands, drive-through and other stand-up restaurants are prospering, according to the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. They "offer an appealing off-premises option for busy people," Annika Stenssoon of the National Restaurant Assn. told the *Star-Telegram*.

Sandwiches, salads and bottled or canned cold drinks are mainstays of the grab-and-go case, but other foods are popular as well. "Whatever can be put in a portable package will leave our facility," Denisa Cate, food and nutrition director at Henry County (TN) Medical Center told *NRN*.

Merchandising the 'Airscreens'

The idea of takeout food has so gripped the national psyche that some people, especially on campuses, take their meals in a "clamshell" disposable container, pick up disposable plastic forks – and go to a table to eat, even though real china, forks and spoons are available.

The trend brings new importance to the often undervalued grab-and-go display case. (Refrigerated units are called "airscreens.") Commonly, they are tucked into a corner or along a side wall and stuffed with packaged cold drinks. This is convenient

Mid-Mornings, Afternoons Offer New Sales Opportunities

"Coffees and smoothies are now snacks," says Joseph Pawlak of Technomics, Inc., a research firm. "It's hitting a new daypart or sub-daypart."

As reported by *cspnet.com*, restaurants are finding increased sales during the traditional coffee break times between breakfast and lunch and mid-afternoon, Technomic found.

Even at locations that offer free coffee in offices and other worksites, the dining center can garner a share of breaktime business if you offer something not available in break rooms, like premium coffees, coffee drinks, specialty teas and snacks.

Restaurants also are finding increased breakfast sales during non-traditional times, according to NPD Group, another researcher, *Nation's Restaurant News* reports.

Most buyers (35%) are 18 to 34 years old, followed by 35-39-year oldsters (21%), Bonnie Riggs, a NPD analyst, told *NRN*.

for the operator – the cases doesn't need to be filled more than once a day – but it overlooks the worth of an important sales and profit opportunity.

Grab-and-go requires no servers. The products are placed on display and the customer does the rest, just as they do in supermarkets and other retail outlets.

Dining service operators can take some cues from the way supermarkets and other retailers display products. They know the most productive selling territory is at eye level. Why fill these shelves with low-margin bottles and cans?

Fill the aircreeen's upper shelves with attractively packaged sandwiches, salads, desserts and other products. Put the cold drinks on the one or two bottom shelves. Customers will reach down for them. Meanwhile, your higher-margin fresh foods are right where the customer looks first.

If you have microwave ovens in coffee pantries or break rooms, why not display pizza wedges, hot sandwiches and other heat-and-eat foods in the aircreeen? It will reduce traffic at the staffed stations and may attract some new customers, including some who might pick up lunch when they stop in for morning coffee and want to save time at midday.

It will pay to ensure your customers see your packaged products as fresh. Put date labels on the packages and discard leftovers every night. The cost of throw-aways will be more than offset by sales if customers are assured your products are fresh.

Location, Location

The restaurateur's mantra about location applies to the grab-and-go case. The ideal location is between the server entry and the cashier station – as close to the cashiers as possible – and out of the path to the staffed stations. This enables customers in a hurry to come into the server, make selections, pay for them and be on their way with minimal delay. If traffic warrants, you may try opening an express lane (just like at the supermarkets) for grab-and-go customers at peak times.

Clarion can help you improve takeout sales and all other aspects of your dining service.
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