

FRESH FOOD CHOICES

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Global Partners' newest c-store concept, Alltown Fresh, is designed to showcase fresh, healthy food and beverages.

BETTER FOR YOU, BETTER FOR SALES

Today's consumers want access to healthy foods and beverages at all times and all places By Renée M. Covino

FORWARD-THINKING convenience store operators across the United States are jumping onto the healthier bandwagon. In a recent survey conducted by NACS, the Association for Convenience & Fuel Retailing, 62 percent of c-store retailers said the presence of better-for-you items increased in their stores in the past year.

In early May, c-store industry giant 7-Eleven Inc. announced that it was introducing nearly 100 new better-for-you items from 31 up-and-coming companies into select stores as part of a test. The selection, placed in 125 Los Angeles-area stores, was curated from 7-Eleven's first "Next Up" emerging brands showcase,

which was held at its Store Support Center in Irving, Texas, last fall.

The better-for-you product assortment includes options for power-snackers, restricted diet-followers and anyone looking for ways to incorporate more functional, better-for-you sips and snacks to keep them fueled while on the go, according to 7-Eleven. The items span keto, paleo, vegan, organic, high-protein, low-glycemic, gluten-free, nutrient-dense, plant-based and cold-pressed.

"When our emerging brands team created this unique product assortment in collaboration with our category managers, the goal was to give customers drinks and snacks that they might not expect to find at a 7-Eleven store," said 7-Eleven Vice President of New Business Development Chris Harkness. "Customers are demanding healthier options, and we know LA customers are leading the country in health and wellness trends, always willing to try the newest and most innovative products and services."

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Young consumers between the ages of 18 and 34 are particularly interested in the functional aspect of foods, according to research conducted by youth marketing and millennial research firm Y-Pulse. These consumers want products that not only satisfy their hunger, but also pack a nutritional punch. They say they enjoy eating superfoods such as dried fruits, nuts and seeds that serve specific functional purposes.

Along with wanting their healthier foods to taste good, younger consumers also want healthy eating to be easy, convenient and work around their on-the-go lifestyles. Specifically, the findings of a recent Y-Pulse study showed that:

- 81 percent say they shouldn't have to try too hard to eat healthy;
- 76 percent say they are likely to buy raw fruits and vegetables to eat on the go; and
- 66 percent say they don't mind paying extra for a snack if it's a healthy option.

Drilling down into specific healthy trends, GlobalWebIndex Trends Analyst Chris Beer pointed out that the market researcher's most recent quarterly global study revealed that veganism and meat-free products are attracting a lot of attention at the moment.



Kombucha and smoothies (below) are among the better-for-you beverages available at Alltown Fresh.

"Celebrities endorse making healthier choices, like buying free-range meat or cutting down on meat altogether," Beer told *Convenience Store News*. "Many food brands have bought into the vegan movement by offering alternatives to appeal to a broader customer base, such as Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods; the latter backed by Bill Gates."

Millennials aged 22 to 35 are regularly considered to be the ones driving the sustainable movement with their lifestyle and behavioral changes, Beer explained. Millennials also are reportedly more likely than any other generation to pay extra for eco-friendly products.

"Generation Z is hot on their heels, and figures for this generation are only likely to grow as they come into greater disposable income," Beer added. "It will be well worth watching how Gen Z shopping habits develop."

Healthy & Convenient

To marry convenience with health and wellness, U.S. c-store operators are trying out multiple approaches. Among the various tactics being applied are:

Create a new concept store that puts healthy at the forefront — Earlier this year, Global Partners LP's Alltown chain opened a new "fresh convenience" focused store concept aptly named Alltown Fresh. Debuting in Plymouth, Mass., Alltown Fresh's mission is to be a go-to destination for consumers to grab healthier food for either on-the-go consumption or for sitting and enjoying the moment. "We believe our guests shouldn't have to sacrifice healthy food for convenience," said Eric Slifka, CEO of Global Partners.





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Join the Partnership for a Healthier America

— Salt Lake City-based Maverik Inc. is just one of several convenience store chains to recently join the nonprofit Partnership for a Healthier America (PHA). In addition to providing healthier packaged and made-to-order food options, Maverik is the first PHA c-store partner to commit to healthier beverages in both the cold vault and at the fountain. “Maverik has been introducing freshly made salads, wraps, fresh sandwiches and more as part of our effort to support customers who are looking for something healthier,” said Ernie Harker, Maverik’s executive director of marketing. “Our commitment to PHA strengthens our efforts to promote an active, healthy lifestyle because adventures aren’t fun when you’re not healthy enough to enjoy them.”

Partner with your local Department of Health

— Aloha Petroleum Ltd.’s Aloha Island Marts chain was the first retail business in Hawaii to join the state Department of Health’s “Choose Healthy Now”

initiative. The program seeks to increase consumer access to healthy foods and beverages by labeling healthier items at the point-of-decision.

Use your loyalty program for the greater good

— La Crosse, Wis.-based Kwik Trip Inc., the first convenience store retailer to sign a commitment with PHA back in 2014, recently made a new PHA commitment to up its fresh food and better-for-you offerings. As part of the new commitment, Kwik Trip updated its customer loyalty program to incorporate the promotion of healthier food options. “Through our PHA commitments, we greatly expanded our fruit, vegetable and other better-for-you food offerings. While our sales of healthier foods have increased, we’ve also received positive feedback from our guests; it’s a win-win and we’re proud to take this next step in the journey toward a healthier future,” said Steve Loehr, Kwik Trip’s vice president of operations support.

Cultivate your own in-house program

— The Army & Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES), which operates convenience stores, gas stations, department stores, restaurants and more, has made it easier for its customers to find better-for-you food and beverage options by utilizing easy-to-spot “Healthier Choices, Healthier Lifestyle” shelf tags. To be included in AAFES’ Healthier Choices BE FIT program, items must contain: fewer than 500 calories and less than 480 milligrams of sodium for entrees; 200 calories or less and fewer than 230 milligrams of sodium for snacks; 40 percent or less of calories from fat for entrees and snacks; and fewer than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat for entrees and snacks. AAFES currently carries roughly 400 Healthier Choices BE FIT-approved items.

What Is Healthy, Really?

Today, “healthy eating” isn’t a set of hard and fast rules, but rather a state of mind — “a continuous, aspirational approach to food with balance, flexibility and practicality,” according to Ellen Rudman, vice president of strategic planning and research for marketing agency Blue Chip Marketing Worldwide, headquartered in Northbrook, Ill.

Fresh, whole and minimally processed are the current cornerstones of better-for-you. However, the definition of what is “healthy” is in constant evolution.

“Having conducted quite a number of focus groups recently on this topic, what we consistently find across geographic markets and demographic groups is that better choices are typically identified with food that is either known to be fresh-made or made-to-order,” said veteran convenience store industry consultant/designer Joe Bona of Bona Design Lab. Consumers equate freshness with quality and being healthier, he added.

While the definition of healthy continues to evolve, the need for convenience and “on the go” is steadfast and, in fact, stronger than ever. “Consumers demand convenience and evaluate every option through a whole new set of food values,” Rudman said.

She wants c-store retailers to consider: Some consumers think it’s inconvenient to be healthy, so how can your convenience stores change that perception?

What’s On the Horizon?

The definition of what is “healthy” and “better-for-you” is in constant flux.

Looking ahead, industry experts believe the following trends will gain in consumer popularity and thus, grow in importance for convenience store operators:

- **Choose your own level of healthfulness.** C-stores jumping on the healthier bandwagon need to provide menu options that allow for “some degree of customization and choice,” according to veteran c-store industry consultant/designer Joe Bona, president of Bona Design Lab. “...When health-



7-Eleven recently introduced nearly 100 new better-for-you items into select stores as part of a test.

minded customers are given a range of choices about the food they order, they feel more in control and believe they are making better decisions.”

- **Customizable better-for-you beverages.** Beverages continue to lead the way in desired and perceived health benefits, Bona advised. Currently trending is macha tea, hand-shaken teas, and blended or frozen juice-based drinks.

- **Protein packed.** It's widely recognized that protein keeps you full longer and can give on-the-go snacks “staying power” vs. leaving the consumer hungry an hour later, according to Ellen Rudman, vice president of strategic planning and research for marketing agency Blue Chip Marketing Worldwide. Plant-based proteins are rising in popularity, she noted, pointing specifically to pea, hemp and mixed plant proteins.

- **Meet the flexitarians.** As the name suggests, a flexitarian diet is flexible and a purposeful move away from a meat-heavy or animal-based diet, Rudman explained. “As more and more consumers are opting to choose plant-based alternatives, the plant-based alternatives are mimicking the classic animal-based food we are used to, like tuna, bacon, burgers, yogurt and milk,” she said, urging c-store operators to keep pace with the flexitarian movement. **CSN**

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