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COVID-19 triggers shifts in consumer food preferences

April 7, 2020



The coronavirus and government quarantines have triggered significant shifts in consumer shopping behavior, packaging preferences as well as purchase priorities. That's the topline finding from a national consumer survey released by Category Partners.

According to a national study of 2,000 consumers, survey participants say their food shopping trip frequency is down, basket size is up and in fresh departments more consumers say they are now

looking for packaged perishable items.

“The consumer response strongly confirms what we’ve been seeing in the syndicated supermarket scan data,” said Steve Lutz, senior vice president of insights for Category Partners. “Food purchase behavior to date has been linked to pantry loading and perceptions of food durability and storability. Across the board, consumers report their largest purchase increases have been in center store food products and frozen foods. But that’s just the beginning because about 40 percent of consumers say they have also increased purchases of meat, produce and deli items with about a third of consumers reporting they have increased usage of online food ordering.”

Cara Ammon, senior vice president of research at Category Partners who directed the study, said that while food shopping behaviors have shifted quickly, there are substantial demographic variances among consumer groups: “I think one of the more interesting finding is that younger consumers, particularly those under the age of 35, are far more likely to report major food shopping changes.”

According to Ammon, the survey found shoppers under the age of 35 far more likely than older consumers to report increased pantry loading shopping trips, increased purchases of packaged vs. bulk fresh foods, and increased purchases of larger sized packages.

“Obviously concern with Coronavirus is high among all age segments, but the reported shifts in shopping trips and altered food purchase behavior was substantially higher among younger shoppers,” said Ammon. “And of course, younger people report much higher use of online food shopping while older consumers are more likely to have not changed embraced this technology even when facing the quarantine.”

Ammon said there were also substantial ethnic variances with African Americans and Hispanics more likely to have increased shopping trips, increased purchases and buying larger-sized packages than white consumers.

Lutz noted that the most national retail scan data suggest consumers are now shifting beyond pantry loading and shifting toward what are likely more sustainable purchase habits. “Scan data in early March showed consumers were literally buying everything across the total store,” said Lutz. “Now that we have four weeks of data we can see that by the end of March, purchase patterns had largely shifted again, away from much of the pantry loading type behavior.”

“Produce department data for the last week of March shows a dollar change of only 16 percent compared to the same week last year. Earlier in March week over week dollar increases were double and triple those levels. The week ending March 28, produce dollars dropped back 18 percent from the week of March 21.”

Ammon added that one of the more sobering findings in the study was consumers reporting a change in job status. “Twenty percent of survey respondents aged 25-44 years old said they have changed their food shopping behavior because of a furlough or lost job,” said Ammon. “That’s a remarkable finding and doesn’t mean these people are completely out of work as they may just be experiencing reduced hours. But it does indicate that chapter two of this virus will be the economic impacts that we are just now beginning to see at retail.”

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