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Online to decline, stockpiling to stay post COVID-19

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Health and safety will remain a top concern for consumers once stay-at-home restrictions are lifted, according to a nationwide survey, *Eating 2020: How COVID-19 Will Change Consumer Engagement With Food*. The vast majority of those surveyed want grocery stores to have employees wear face masks and encourage social distancing. However, when presented with all safety options, shoppers are most concerned about the perceived health threat posed by other customers, more so than employees.

“These findings contribute data to what we’ve believed to be true, that groceries should prepare to meet consumer expectations for health and safety for some time to come,” said Hinda Mitchell, president of Inspire PR Group. “Clearly defined protocols around how these businesses will keep their customers safe — mostly from other customers — will be critical to restoring trust and confidence.”

National PR firm Inspire PR Group and full-service market research firm Illuminology released the results of the survey, which gauged more than 1,800 U.S. consumers’ food purchasing trends before, during and after the COVID-19 stay-at-home restrictions.

Online to Decline

Additional insights reveal that although grocery chains saw a surge of new customers for online pickup and delivery orders in April 2020, these platforms are likely to see significant declines back to pre-COVID-19 levels or lower after stay-at-home restrictions are lifted. The survey found that of the recently acquired shoppers, more than one-third are unlikely to use online pickup and nearly half are unlikely to use online delivery when restrictions are lifted.

The research was conducted April 17-20 and surveyed 1,300 U.S. consumers and an additional sample of 500 Ohio consumers. The survey asked respondents about their grocery and restaurant behaviors in the first two months of 2020 before COVID-19 became a crisis in the U.S., behaviors during stay-at-home orders in April, and how consumers anticipate their behaviors will change in the first 60 days following when orders are lifted.

“Overall, these data tell a story of consumers’ changing purchase patterns before, during, and after an incredible shock to our economic and health systems,” said Orié Kristel, CEO of Illuminology. “Groceries and restaurants need to be especially cautious when planning their operations after COVID-19 stay-at-home restrictions are lifted. Although many customers likely crave a great dining or shopping experience, many customers are also concerned about potential monetary or health issues.”

Additional insights from the U.S. survey of 1,300 respondents revealed:

Grocery Store Behaviors Will Change

- Stockpiling extra nonperishable foods and household supplies is likely to continue, with four in 10 respondents saying they are very likely to buy and store these items after stay-at-home restrictions are lifted.
- Consumers are fearful of other shoppers making them ill. Approximately 23 percent of shoppers most prefer that customers wear face masks and 18 percent prefer that the number of customers in the store be limited.
- When the shelter-in-place restrictions are lifted, in-store visits will increase, but online shopping will decrease or remain flat.

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