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SEPC reveals consumer takes on produce and technology innovation

September 23, 2022

Today, the [Southeast Produce Council](#) released What's New? From the Consumer View 2022 in one of two educational sessions at its fall show, Southern Innovations.

"Only 12 percent of consumers meet the daily recommended amount of fresh produce," said David Sherrod, president and CEO of SEPC. "That means there is a lot of room for growth. We looked at how technology and innovation at the farm, in the store, on the menu, and for the planet can be the helping hand for consumers to boost their fresh produce consumption. Exhibitors were encouraged to highlight innovations in each section and What's New? Silent Theater presentations took place throughout the exhibit hours by pioneering organizations."



David Sherrod

Top findings for each of the four sections of the research are as follows.

At the Farm

A majority of consumers (74 percent) are unaware of how growers use technology, but four in 10 are interested in virtual field, farm or greenhouse visits. Additionally, half of consumers like the idea of mini greenhouses in-store or in the restaurant. This is driven by 55 percent of consumers wanting to know more about how the fresh produce they buy is grown. Top ways to communicate, according to

consumers, are the package label (57 percent), information on the brand's website or app (47 percent) and in-store signage (42 percent).

"Importantly, the study found that innovation can help drive sales growth," Sherrod said. "More than half of consumers are interested in new varieties."

New mixed varieties and new sizes, such as one-portion cauliflowers or mini avocados draw the highest interest. Additionally, 46 percent of consumers are intrigued with the idea of enhanced functional benefits for fresh fruits and vegetables, such as extra vitamin C, longer shelf life or tear-free onions. "Boomers are much more likely to think this is a little to sci-fi but 54 percent of Gen Z who grew up in a world of package claims and callouts like the idea," Sherrod said.

In the Store

"The study found that the competition for fresh produce is much, much wider than frozen and canned," Sherrod said. "Supplements, smoothies, squeeze pouches, shots and center-store items touting plant-based are all taking a bite out of fresh produce sales." Sherrod refers to the 81 percent of consumers who believe that these types of items can help them reach the recommend amount of fruit and vegetables.

Serving size education draws universal interest, among 50 percent of consumers and 42 percent like the idea of their grocery store offering personalized nutrition programs. In addition to portion size guidance, consumers want to see nutrition information, specific health benefits, origin and preparation/storage instructions.

Consumers also strongly believe in the link between fresh produce and their own health. While awareness of prescription produce is low, at 20 percent, 53 percent believe fresh produce can help manage health issues.

Promotions remain very important, with in-store signage, apps and the digital circular having replaced the paper ad as the top research area. Routine meals are out and consumers look to a wide variety of sources for recipe and meal ideas, including high interest for shoppable recipes (46 percent).

On the Menu

The high level of inflation is pressuring restaurant trips and prompting 52 percent of consumers to change their orders when buying from restaurants, whether takeout, delivery or eating on premise. Sixty percent look for cheaper items on the menu, 54 percent skip desserts, 44 percent skip appetizers and 44 percent go to a cheaper restaurant altogether.

Consumers also expressed high interest in a number of ways to boost fresh produce consumption at restaurants: 71 percent is interested in a trip to the salad bar complementary to a main entrée; 65 percent would like to see beverages/smoothies made with fresh fruit/vegetables on the menu; 63 percent are interested in fresh fruit as an option for dessert or an appetizer; and 60 percent like the idea of being able to swap traditional carbs such as pasta or rice with vegetables.

"The study also found consumer interest in crossing over trends seen in retail onto restaurant menus," Sherrod said. "Seasonal and local fruit and vegetables are the top areas of interest in retail and also lead the list of desired menu attributes for foodservice." Yet, in today's inflationary environment, 49 percent of consumers feel the best cost and quality should be a restaurant's priority — overriding the origin, including global sourcing. Consumer agreement on restaurants using fresh produce versus frozen or canned is much higher, at 72 percent. And 54 percent like to see more

unique fresh produce on the menu.

The use of technology for ordering and paying for food in restaurants is becoming much more accepted, but the idea of robots bringing out the food instead of a server is all but a slam dunk with consumers: 31 percent simply cannot imagine the concept and 26 percent say they couldn't stand the idea.

For the Planet

Four in 10 Americans struggle with fruit and vegetables going bad before they could eat them and 91 percent end up throwing some fresh produce away. Additionally, 37 percent struggle with fresh produce being sold in packages that are too big for their households.

“With food waste at home a clear issue, 46 percent of Americans love the idea of various shelf-life technologies,” Sherrod said. “Consumers want to know about the impact on food safety, nutrition and taste, but are excited to see solutions.”

Consumers say commitments regarding limiting food and package waste, giving back to the community and supporting special causes are important and can influence purchases among a little more than half. While quality and freshness are the overriding purchase driver among Boomers, sustainability is the overriding driver for 35 percent of Gen Z. Yet, at most 16 percent of consumers recall produce brands having made commitments in these areas.

“In reality, virtually every produce brand and every retailer has sustainability commitments in place,” Sherrod said. “However, consumers aren't aware. We have an opportunity to do good and build positive sentiment among consumers at the same time.”

The online study among 1,500 consumers was conducted and presented by 210 Analytics. The study was fielded in July 2022.

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