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Getting inside consumers' minds: What's driving their produce buying behaviors?

By

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What's on shoppers' minds in these not-quite-yet-normal times?

If you think of it like a shopping cart or basket, there's a lot in there. There are the staples, like sustenance and nutrition. There are probably some novel things, based on a sense of food exploration or discovery. These days, there's likely to be more items bought on sale, driven by the need or desire to cut costs during inflationary times.

Like a full shopping cart, plenty of things fill consumers' minds as they weigh the factors that go into purchase decisions. It's not a one-or-the-other kind of proposition when people are in the in-store produce section or online figuring out what to buy.

When it comes to produce, our research at FMI shows that consumers are driven by their simultaneous interests in health and wellness, convenience, variety and price. It's a balancing act, to be sure, but those drivers are shaping the produce marketplace in notable ways.

Price: It's hard to avoid the topic of — and impact of — inflation. With the cost of produce for at-home consumption continuing to edge up (the CPI for fruits and vegetables was up 0.7 percent in June following a 0.6 percent hike over the previous month), many shoppers are adjusting their behaviors accordingly. According to The Power of Produce report released by FMI earlier this year, an overwhelming 82 percent of shoppers believe that fresh produce prices are somewhat or much higher now than at the end of last year and 92 percent are making changes. In fact, for the first time, price is a top attribute ranked by consumers when deciding what kind of produce to buy, on par with ripeness and appearance.

How does all of this play out at the point of purchase? More shoppers are looking for savings, some are trading down from premium products and many are seeking to optimize their purchases by avoiding food waste. Still, it's worth bearing in mind that despite inflation, eating at home and buying produce at a supermarket are still the lowest-cost opportunities.

1. Health and Well-being: This is still a sweet spot for those that grow, distribute and sell fresh produce. The pandemic only amplified shoppers' interest in choosing foods that fit into a healthy lifestyle and that offer benefits ranging from immunity-boosting properties to weight maintenance to wholesome, natural nutrition. The Power of Produce found that consumers are doubling down on health and wellness, with six in 10 shoppers buying fruits and vegetables to deliver on specific benefits. Moreover, people often prioritize their well-being while sacrificing other purchases considered to be a "want" instead of a "need," whether that's a high end cut of meat, a piece of apparel or a fancy vacation.

2. Convenience: “Value” is a broad term, encompassing price savings as well as other kinds of benefits, such as time savings, ease of use, shelf life, etc. Value is very personal for consumers. Although high prices might be causing some people to downshift to conventional produce — every time they are at the store or just on some occasions — products that provide some kind of added value still resonate with people who continue to cook and eat at home more often than they did before the pandemic. According to the data in *The Power of Produce*, valued-added and convenience-oriented produce items are still over-performing.

3. Variety: Inflation may be tamping down some behaviors, but many shoppers are still seeking out and appreciating new varieties of fruits and vegetables. New varieties are a great growth engine for the grocery industry.

Meanwhile, as the weather cools, there are other additions to consumers’ mindsets — and their actual shopping carts. Heartier kinds of produce, like root vegetables, are back in the basket. Consumers are also casting an eye on the holidays, making preliminary lists for celebratory meals that reflect their eagerness to gather in groups without going overboard on their grocery bill.

Speaking of lists, *The Power of Produce* underscored shoppers’ increasing propensity for planning and mapping out their purchases. Up to 82 percent of people are now shopping based on a list, which means that purveyors of produce can tout deals and work harder to encourage impulse buys through seasonal offerings, great promotions and eye-catching displays.

Ultimately, what’s on people’s lists and what winds up in their cart, homes and tables meets their parallel but important interests. Keeping tabs on what those interests are and how you can deliver on them helps ensure that customers keep produce — and, more specifically, your produce — in mind.

Find *The Power of Produce* at www.FMI.org/FreshFoods.

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