


The Hartman Group's Shelley Balanko on Consumer Buying Trends in a Pandemic

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During extraordinary times, insights into consumer behaviors become more vital than ever to businesses. The Hartman Group, a food culture consultancy, provides such trends, insights, and strategic counsels to professionals in the food and beverage industry. The company conducts its own primary research with expertise in areas including sustainability and the health and wellness consumer.

In 2012, the Hartman Group developed the Eating Occasions Compass, a database that documents the who, what, when, where, and why of eating occasions in the United States. Through this database, Shelley Balanko, Ph.D., Senior Vice President of the Hartman Group, said, “We came to learn that often it's not the consumer that is different but the occasion that is different, and we started to see the usefulness of looking at consumer behavior through the lens of eating occasions.”

Prior to the pandemic, consumers were on the course of eating food alone for immediate consumption, meaning a lot of what we consumed was eaten within an hour of being purchased. Balanko noted that consumers were on a trajectory of an “immediate gratification style of eating.”

However, this activity of quickly eating meals alone does not match the ideals of the average American. According to the Hartman Group's research, Americans have felt a pull towards wanting to have at least one meal together. Balanko mentioned that before the pandemic consumers struggled with that ideal. But now, even if consumers cannot have dinner together regularly, they are starting to prioritize having at least one meal a week as a family.

Meanwhile, Balanko predicts that consumer concern for personal and collective health will linger for some time. “Even though foodservice has begun to open up, consumers are reporting that they are going to eat out less in the future even as COVID-19 passes.” Many consumers claim this decision is not because they do not trust foodservice providers, but they do not trust other diners. Consumers are expected to play it safe with outdoor dining and continue relying on takeout and delivery.

Since consumers are eating more meals at home, there is more sourcing from pantries going on, resulting in regular trips to the grocery store. However, consumers are spending less time in the store and no longer shopping in an exploratory way. Balanko described a

“get in and get out mentality,” where consumers are on a rushed mission to get what they need safely.

When it comes to coveted items being out of stock, Balanko reported a mix of consumer behavior with some purchasing a different brand and/or trying something completely new. Some consumers stated if they could not get a specific brand they would try the private label. For others, their existing brand was available, but they were concerned it may not be on the shelf during their next trip. Therefore, they would purchase their usual product and a shelf stable item in preparation for an empty store shelf next time.

Early on, consumers were turning to nostalgic childhood brands as a means of comfort. Now, consumers are faced with more cooking at home and planning. “Consumers are looking for options that will allow them to cook from home conveniently and for their level of skill,” said Balanko. While consumers are dealing with working remotely and children at home, convenience while keeping it fresh is the goal.

Also, prices are less of a concern to eaters during the pandemic. “Think about all the money spent on foodservice. Last year consumers spent more at restaurants than grocery stores,” said Balanko. Consumers are now using that money on items that will keep them healthy. “The pandemic has shined a spotlight on wellness and immunity, and we have seen organic items do well in the past few months,” stated Balanko. Overall, consumers are not unconscious about price but are willing to pay for quality.

While consumers are adapting to a new normal, safety concerns are expected to remain a top priority. “Delivery and takeout will keep consumers going to foodservice and keep local businesses alive,” said Balanko. Meal kits are certainly an option, and foodservice operators have started to recreate the in-dining experience by offering items for consumers to prepare in the comfort and safety of their own home. Balanko noted that this is the incarnation of convenience that consumers have embraced and will continue to do so as they have become more intentional with their purchases.

Balanko also mentioned the importance of transparency. Consumers want to know what companies are doing to protect their workers and customers. Cleanliness remains a major priority as well, as consumers would like to see that extra precautions are being taken to keep restaurants and stores sanitized.

For foodservice, Balanko suggests operators help consumers have a dining experience that provides a sense of discovery. Operators should develop concepts that make dining at home a treat for consumers and innovate beyond takeout and delivery. When it comes to retail, Balanko recommends companies aid consumers in convenient ways to cook at home and empower them to develop and grow their skills in the kitchen.

Urner Barry's Executive Conference and Global Protein Summit has teamed up to create one, epic online event in 2020. Featuring both live and on-demand sessions exploring the biggest issues facing the food industry today, this event is a must-attend virtual experience. The event will run October 6-9, 2020. Time is running out, register your spot now! Visit urnerbarry.com/events to book and see the complete agenda.

Shelley Balanko, Ph.D. will be speaking at Urner Barry's Executive Conference and Global Protein Summit event. Her session, "Consumer trends in a pandemic: What do they want?" will be available on demand on Wednesday, October 7.

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