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Members Helping Members™

Produce Sampling at Retail: How Will It Come Back?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen sampling come to a halt. We know that sampling is an important marketing tool for fresh produce – from introducing new items or varieties to reminding shoppers of all-time favorites. The great taste of fresh fruits and vegetables will win them over.

So we asked retail, supplier and packaging members their thoughts on the future of sampling. Here’s what they had to say:

Will Retail Sampling Return? When? How?

Consensus: Sampling will be back, but it will be different, and it may not be back soon.

Though some believe sampling could be back within a year if new procedures are established, there’s no consensus about timeframes. Consumers are coming to understand that COVID-19 is not spread

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by food. The return of sampling won't be just about local, state or federal rules, it will also be driven by shopper expectations and confidence.

"I think sampling will come back in some fashion, although not how we are currently used to doing it with product being cut or unpackaged and handed to customers. A new format of individually packaged, pre-cut small samples would probably be the preferred method for sampling going forward. This will not be as cost-effective, but it would provide consumers the ability to try products and feel safe while trying."

"As advances in treatment and other medical news becomes available to offset the effects of COVID-19, the retail grocery industry will need to be flexible in how sampling is done in the future. Eventually we may get back to 'normal' activity in the sampling world, but for now safe sampling will need to contain only sealed products."

What's the Cost of NOT Sampling?

Consensus: Though sampling is an expensive marketing tool, and it may be tough to measure, it produces results. It can introduce new products, showcase new varieties of traditional products, and remind consumers of the taste of their favorites.

Members know that sampling is a costly marketing technique, and it may be best suited to new, differentiated or exceptional items. But sampling produces results. It gives customers confidence they will like the product and are not wasting their money. It drives impulse sales. And it reminds shoppers of what they love about traditional favorites.

"The cost of not doing samples is the lost opportunity to turn a trial into a purchase."

"Our ability to engage the customer to drive consumer acceptance of new varieties will be severely limited (without sampling). New product launches will become much more costly without the ability to sample."

"It's the incremental sales that you lose; nothing makes a customer buy a good (local) peach like letting them try one."

How Can Handling and Packaging Changes Help?

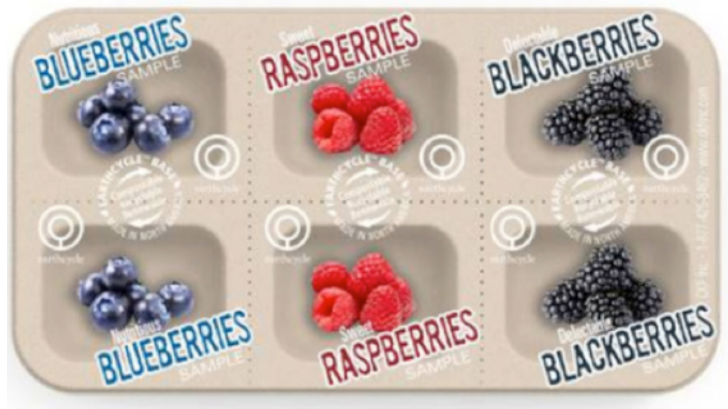
Consensus: Transparent adherence to public health and common-sense safety practices will be critical. These could include distancing, gloves, masks, visible sanitizing stations, tamper-evident packaging. Single-serve or sample-size packaging options would make offering samples easier, even though that could add to the cost. These likely would be produced at the supplier level, and attention to the cold chain would be essential. However, adding new packaging options at the supplier level could be costly – adjusting the pack line, packaging inventory and labeling.

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“Online/Click and Collect: This package (multi-portion tray with film seal over the top, perforated for separation into individual samples) can be used by retail and brand owners to generate interest in new items. A film seal provides visibility and security as well as marketing options (branding, information, etc.). The film seal preserves shelf life. This could be used in association with coupons for future purchases.”

“With the perforated edge, individual sealed sample cups can be provided to the customer to try at store level or to take home. This will not be an immediate option given on-going health and safety restrictions in grocery, but in time, it could be used in store.”

“Communicating to the customer that all health and safety guidelines were followed would be one of the challenges. Customers assume that to be the case but communicating it to a busy shopper is a different issue.”



“Maybe single-serve samples or staffed tables for sampling...I don’t believe the self-service stations are coming back within the next 18 months.”

“Sampling can be pre-packaged in a controlled environment and handed out, and steps will have to be taken to ensure there is no potential for close proximity.”

“Pre-packaged, chilled if necessary, samples would need to be done up in advance and kept in refrigerated cases. This method may be cost-prohibitive, but would make customers feel the safest.”

“Prepared, no-touch, grab-and-go packaging and displays.”

“Maybe a supplier supplied sample pack, a 2-pack of clementines or a 2-ounce pack of cherries, things like that. We sample in 2-ounce cups, using a top might be helpful.”

Sampling for Online Orders?

Consensus: For non-refrigerated items, samples in online orders could be a no-brainer. For perishable product, this could be difficult and expensive. But our contributors had suggestions for sampling in online orders, from coupons to sampling options customers proactively put in their online cart.

“We’ve done this before through our digital coupons/offers. An example: We offered a free Pluot for curbside pickup orders. The customer had to download the coupon and add to their shopping list to get it. It wasn’t just thrown in the bag.”

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“For temperature sensitive items, a coupon is an effective tool to encourage consumers to try.”

“There is an opportunity to target sample in the home, such as a free sample. It will involve more qualifying to reduce waste of random samples. The cost per sample would be more, but with added qualifying, the value of each sample will be greater.”

“Some of the meal delivery companies could offer sampling opportunities to brands as they already send coupons and information in the boxes. Retailers could offer opportunity for brands to cross-promote, e.g. provide a sample size of salad dressing or hummus with purchase of artichoke or offer an artichoke with purchase of hummus. It’s like co-marketing with on-pack coupons but online.”

“Online sampling may be possible, if the customer received a prepackaged/precut sample in their order upon pickup or delivery. Careful consideration would need to be made to be sure to identify the product that is being sampled with information on flavor and future product availability included.”

“We could offer a small educational insert to order along with a sample of product.”

“It would be great to see the retailers get creative with online promotions to complement the increase in online ordering and ‘speed shopping’ that is happening in stores during these difficult times.”

Alternatives to Sampling to Familiarize Consumers with Products?

Consensus: Though nothing beats the ability to taste a product, using additional tools such as testimonials, retailer “picks of the week,” virtual reality or video field tours, recipes, and more can help customers become familiar with a new item or understand the new qualities of an existing item.

“New products in meal kits – either purchased at store level or online is a good option. Product distribution in delivered ‘produce boxes’ is another option.”

“If the brand has invested in building an engaged audience such as a permission-based mailing list, the value of each mailing list contact is greater. This is the audience that can be further refined to participate in a sampling exercise. Brand influencers do raise awareness and highlight taste and uses. I see a modification of the current influencer model to broaden reach and reduce cost per influence/sample.”

“Other ways to let consumers know about new products can be accomplished with social media, in-store media and print ads. Suppliers can provide retailers all the tools necessary to give their customers current product information.”

“Short videos and social media posts all are great tools to inspire consumers as well as celebrity personalities using the products: posting, sharing. Example: A MasterClass program inspired me to tackle Cauliflower Steaks with Gordan Ramsey’s class.”