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A fresh take for fresh food

Retailers and product suppliers point the way forward

Sales of fresh food at retail stores continue to stay elevated in 2021 compared with prepandemic levels, despite the continued recovery of the restaurant food service sector that began in earnest during the first half of the year. So far, it appears the shift toward eating at home is here to stay, which is great news for the industry. Of course, fresh food retailers and product suppliers won't be able to just coast on their recent success. They are already facing new challenges and looking ahead to what's coming next.

Deloitte and FMI-The Food Industry Association (FMI) recently polled 29 food industry companies and facilitated a roundtable discussion of senior executives who are leading fresh strategy at their companies. While the results can only be considered directional, the respondents did represent more than 20% of all grocery store locations in the United States and included product suppliers from a variety of fresh categories. Executives from these companies shared their strategic priorities, views on the hottest topics in fresh, and how they are investing.



The 50,000-foot view

Most companies rate the fresh category as having the highest strategic importance to their overall revenue growth plans during the next one to three years. The industry is backing it up with investment: More than 80% of respondents are adding additional floor space, product offerings, and/or staff.

Attracting labor and maintaining safety are the top-ranking priorities for the industry, but these are table stakes. When it comes to strategic and competitive themes, retailers prioritized 1) reenergizing the in-store fresh experience, 2) building fresh in e-commerce, and 3) offering fresh meal solutions. Each of these items is explored further in the sections ahead. It is also clear that retailers are asking for more from their product suppliers. Given the shortage of labor, suppliers are being asked to take on more preprocessing and value-added work prior to product entering the store. They are also being leaned on to provide richer digital content to fuel e-commerce shopping, as well as to provide taste and packaging innovation.

Fresh defined

Fresh includes fresh fruits and vegetables, meat, seafood, bakery, floral, and deli purchases. Fresh food is food that has not been preserved and has not yet spoiled. Fresh food does not include shelf-stable products or ones that do not have cold chain requirements.

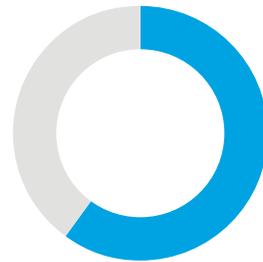
Fresh priorities



Reenergizing the fresh experience

With consumers returning to retail outlets in growing numbers, in-store continues to be the preferred channel for fresh food; 70% of consumers shop for fresh food in-store. To beat the competition, retailers will likely need to focus on creating an energized shopping experience, and six in 10 of them are investing to make it happen. Retailers believe these efforts will drive revenue growth, not just in fresh, but also across categories.

Top-ranking measures for improving the experience include increasing the responsiveness of store associates, remodeling the physical space, and creating strong in-store themes. However, recruiting and retaining skilled labor is a major challenge to successfully using these tactics for eight in 10 retailers. Suppliers said they can collaborate with retailers to create a more exciting fresh shopping experience through **“building innovative displays,” “more merchandising support,”** and **“product and packaging innovation.”**



60%

invest significantly in store experience



Building fresh in e-commerce

As lockdowns and safety restrictions during the pandemic disrupted in-store shopping for some, e-commerce provided consumers with an alternative. More than a year later, e-commerce continues to be popular. While growing in-store sales continues to be a higher priority, fresh executives acknowledge the critical role e-commerce plays. But controlling cost and making online more profitable has always been a struggle. Only three in 10 expect the profit margin on e-commerce to be the same or better than traditional in-store sales in the next two years.

As a reflection of its strategic importance and the need to overcome the profitability barrier, more companies are taking e-commerce in-house. Over the next one to three years, six in 10 retailers in our poll plan to rely more on their own e-commerce channels over those offered by third parties. They are investing in a variety of fulfillment options, including home delivery, in-store pickup, and curbside pickup. There were concerns that digital ad dollars from center store brand names, sometimes called “retail media,” might push fresh food into a back corner of the digital store, but little evidence was found to support this happening in practice. Instead, seven in 10 fresh departments say they have a clear seat at the table in making overall e-commerce strategic decisions.

To succeed in this channel, retailers need suppliers’ support. The suppliers we polled mentioned ways in which they can help retailers gain more traction for their products by **“engaging in broader digital promotional activities”** and **“providing better online content for products”** to improve consumer engagement. This includes **“enhancing website photos and offerings”** and background stories for websites and social media. Suppliers can also contribute by **“providing packaging designed more specifically for the online channel.”**



60%

plan to rely more on own e-commerce

Offering fresh meal solutions

Customers' lives may still be home-centered, but that doesn't mean those lives aren't becoming increasingly hectic. Consumers are looking for faster meal solutions and more variety in what they prepare at home.

Among retailers, nine in 10 said that fresh meal solutions are an important growth segment. A similar number said they are investing in offering fresh meals, especially grab-and-go meals, build-your-own meals, and self-service salad bars. A critical component is to create awareness among consumers around fresh meal solutions. Retailers are inclined toward the use of in-store signage, recipe suggestions, and digital media advertising to market fresh meal solutions.

Retailers need support from suppliers in **"new product and flavor innovation," "packaging innovation,"** and **"merchandising,"** as well as creating new types of meal kits. One of the areas where suppliers and retailers can work together is maintaining consistent meal solution quality and price despite input volatility.



90%

**say fresh meal solutions
is a high-growth segment**

Staying ahead in fresh

It is an exciting, yet challenging time for the food industry as consumers move counter to multidecade trends and eat more food at home again. Hopefully, the investment in fresh will pay dividends for years to come. But one thing seems quite clear: Food retailers and product suppliers are likely going to need to depend on each other and work more closely together than ever before in order to fully seize the opportunity.



Contacts

Barb Renner

Vice chair & US leader
Consumer Products
Deloitte LLP
brenner@deloitte.com
+1 612 397 4705

Justin Cook

Consumer Products research leader
Deloitte's Consumer Industry Center
Deloitte LLP
juscook@deloitte.com
+1 617 397 4705

Geetanjali Chitta

Senior analyst, Consumer Products
Consumer Industry Center
Deloitte Support Services India Pvt. Ltd.
gechitta@deloitte.com

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