



Part-Time Vegetarians Are Opportunity for Produce Marketers

By ROSEANNE HARPER

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NEW YORK "Flexitarians" occasional vegetarians who limit their meat consumption hold tremendous potential for marketers of fresh produce.

In fact, the produce industry has never been so well-positioned to appeal to part-time vegetarians with new varieties and familiar products that boast heightened flavor and premium quality, sources told SN.

Numerous studies over the past couple of years show that while the number of people following a strict vegetarian diet has not increased much, the number cutting down on meat consumption has climbed significantly. They usually refer to themselves as part-time vegetarians and the industry has labeled them flexitarians.

Carrots and celery topped one list of favorite fruits and vegetables with vegetarians.

"Strict vegetarians are stable portion of the population, but more people are eating vegetarian-esque," said Gwynne Rogers, business director, Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability, at the Natural Marketing Institute, Harleysville, Pa. "We've seen increases in the use of meat substitutes, vegetarian refrigerated/frozen entrees and soy-based products over the past four years."

The steady growth of such items almost certainly dovetails with increased fruit and vegetable consumption, industry sources said.

At the Soyfoods Council, Urbandale, Iowa, Linda Funk, the executive director, said she sees a definite correlation. "As people are making choices about being a vegetarian or flexitarian, soy foods are on the top of the food options," she said. "Soy protein is a complete protein and has all the essential amino acids/

A 2006 Roper Report shows 5% more people tried soy products in 2005 than in 2004, which suggests a slight switch away from meat, she said. In total, 43% had tried soy last year, according to the Roper data.

Strict vegetarianism is not a major trend and, in fact, is driven mostly by teens "in a

faddish sort of way," said Michelle Barry, senior vice president at The Hartman Group, Bellevue, Wash. With that age group, vegetarianism is apt to be an ideological decision, she said.

On the other hand, baby boomers are learning to eat differently and health is foremost in their minds, Barry said. "Health is the most significant driver of flexitarians, although they wouldn't call themselves flexitarians," she said. "It's just that they're looking for alternate protein sources. They are eating less meat, and part of that equation is they're eating more fruits and vegetables."

ON THE RISE

This past summer, the Natural Marketing Institute pointed to figures in its annual LOHAS study that show just 2% of respondents consider themselves vegetarians, meaning they eat no red meat, fish or poultry. Surprisingly another 2% of respondents think of themselves as vegetarians though they still eat red meat, fish and poultry. Other statistics from the study, which polled more than 2,000 adults online in July, bolster the theory that "partial or vegetarianism" is on the rise.

Indeed, a whopping 28% of respondents said they're trying to cut down on red meat consumption though they still eat some of it. Another 25% consider "vegetarian" to be an important attribute in their food/beverage purchase decisions. The study also showed that 5% of respondents eat poultry and fish but do not eat red meat, and 14% said they have purchased vegetarian foods in the past six months.

The figures could not be compared to NMI studies from a year or two years ago because respondents answered different questions, said Nancy White, NMI's marketing director.

While there's not much quantitative research against which to compare the incidence of flexitarianism, the latest figures are causing researchers to sit up and take notice. In fact, one Produce Marketing Association-commissioned researcher told SN he sees the growth of that segment as particularly important.

Ernie Paicopolos, principal, Opinion Dynamics Corp., who did the research investigating the growth of vegetarianism for the PM A, said he was surprised by the percentage of respondents who are flexitarians.

"When you combine respondents, their family members, and both, you get 14%," he said. "That's a big percentage."

Notably, 32% of people in flexitarian households reported the level of flexitarian eating had increased in the last few years, while 29% in vegetarian households reported vegetarian eating had gone up.

COST-EFFECTIVE DIET

In another interesting conclusion, ODC's survey this summer showed that nearly 60% of respondents said a diet containing fish and meat would be more costly while only 23% said strictly vegetable-fruit diet would be more costly.

That indicates a significant number sees good value in buying fresh produce, but figures also showed they're not very adventurous, Paicopolos said. When vegetarians were asked what fruits or vegetables are most important in their diets, they listed everyday items like carrots and celery.

Carrots topped the list of 23% of respondents, followed by apples, bananas and potatoes. Fruit took a backseat to vegetables, and the nutrient and antioxidant- rich products were at the bottom of lists, when they made the lists at all.

"Berries and mangoes, for instance, were way down on their lists," Paicopolos said.

The lesser volume items that are high in antioxidants and have enhanced flavor are just waiting to be discovered, and that presents marketers with another sales opportunity, one produce marketing consultant noted.

"What about pomegranates and the pomegranate juices? There are even pomegranate/blueberry juice and wonderful apple varieties that weren't even around before," said Ed Odron, owner/president, Produce Marketing & Consulting, Stockton, Calif., and a veteran retailer. He worked at Lucky Stores in Northern California for 40 years, serving as vice president of produce, floral, deli and bakery when he left the chain in 1999.

"All the varieties that are now available year-round, and the peaches and nectarines that are ripe are there," Odron said. "The flavor is there. My hat's off to the growers who are coming up with products that taste good. The candy bar is competition. I think everybody wants to eat healthy but flavor is important."

Paicopolos said his research for the PM A revealed that respondents consider taste very important. "Taste is king," he said.

In another development this week,. Scientific Certification Systems, Emeryville, Calif., expanded its flavor management program to include additional commodities. SCS also is working with more retailers on the project. In addition, it has begun a nutrient management program, working with seed company representatives and breeders.

HEALTHY EATING

Health issues are certainly a major factor driving consumers toward vegetarianism, even if they occasionally eat meat. In addition, the consumer media is doing its part to remind them.

"Women's magazines are full of articles on healthy eating and avoiding obesity. It's all over the media," Odron said.

In fact, the current Martha Stewart Living magazine offers vegetarian recipes and meat alternatives for Thanksgiving dinner.

The trend also is playing out in restaurants. At the upscale Equinox in Washington, D.C., the restaurant recently added this line to its menu: "Vegetarian and vegan alternatives always available."

Though they seem to be reminded constantly of the healthfulness of fruits

and vegetables, consumers could use some encouragement to buy more produce.

One researcher, Peter Rose, partner with Yankelovich, Chapel Hill, N.C., theorizes that even though most people know they need to eat more vegetables and fruits, their lifestyles prevent them from doing so. Or, at least, that's their excuse, he said.

In a February 2006 survey of 2,200 adults over 18, Yankelovich found that 55% of respondents mentioned vegetables when asked to describe a healthy diet. But 49% of respondents said they don't eat enough fruits and vegetables. In another question, they were asked why they couldn't give themselves 100% for eating a healthy diet. In response, 56% said they don't eat enough fruits and vegetables.

Consumers may view fresh vegetables as being inconvenient, Rose speculated.

"We're all time-pressed and the perception many people have is there's something they need to do to leafy vegetables or zucchini, for instance, and that stops them," Rose said.

"The more they think about on-the-go, they think of protein first," he said. "A chicken sandwich or burger. It's just easier."