



Let's Chat Snacks

Under Wraps: What's Next for Off-Premises Packaging?

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Off-premises dining now comprises a larger portion of overall sales than it did pre-pandemic in all six major restaurant segments (family dining, casual dining,



fine dining, quick service, fast casual, and coffee and snack).¹ No doubt, the demand for takeout will remain strong in the coming months as summer temperatures and higher vaccination rates prompt consumers to seek a convenient way to dine outside—and take leftovers home.

Maintaining food's temperature, visual appeal and other attributes is crucial to providing an off-premises dining experience that encourages repeat business, observes Jamie Howe, Datassential's Trends & Insights practice lead. It's one reason why so many operators—including those who hadn't previously offered much takeout or delivery and weren't used to fulfilling sizable, multicomponent orders—turned to sturdy plastic containers early in

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the pandemic, when order volume skyrocketed.

“If you think about the Styrofoam that might have been used pre-pandemic, a regular meal [someone] would have had in a restaurant, stacked in one bag, is going to be crushed,” Howe explains. “The biggest thing is getting what still feels like a quality restaurant product.”

Poor packaging that proves (or is perceived) to be unstable, ineffective or unsafe can be a dealbreaker in terms of customer satisfaction and loyalty, she adds. Mondelez International Foodservice’s 2021 Foodservice Trends: A Look at the Road Ahead report confirms that safety will continue to be a high priority for delivery and takeout packaging this year.²

Assembling Orders

Since March 2020, a majority of operators across all segments have upgraded their takeout and delivery packaging.¹

Some changes were made to help preserve food attributes such as texture. “Part of that could mean thinking, ‘OK, if it’s a burger, we’ll put the toppings on the side instead of directly on the burger so you don’t have bread that gets soggy in transit,’” explains Anne Mills, a director at Technomic.

Other changes addressed health and safety concerns. Disposable cutlery and other individually wrapped items, for example, which were in use before the pandemic began, became a fairly standard order inclusion over the past year. “Single-use is absolutely perceived as more sanitary,” Howe says. “Everything is sealed in self-contained packages. Even if it were something that would have been in a bag before, like a cookie, the expectation [now is that] the cookie will be in a sealed package.”

The rise in third-party delivery service use last year contributed to this increased interest in sealed packaging, according to Mills. “There was a greater push toward tamper-proof packaging—for safety, and also for restaurants to retain some control because it’s one of the things they lose in the delivery process,” she says. “Some restaurants use a sticker on a bag to close it so customers know the package hasn’t been opened since it left the restaurant” or a box that, once closed, “creates a seal that’s activated.”

Even before the pandemic, sustainability had become a growing area of interest for consumers. In a 2018 National Restaurant Association survey, more than half said they were likely to choose a restaurant based on its eco-friendly practices.³ With that in mind, some operators had begun implementing bring-your-own coffee mug programs and packaging food in reusable containers that customers would return post-meal to avoid a surcharge, Mills recalls.

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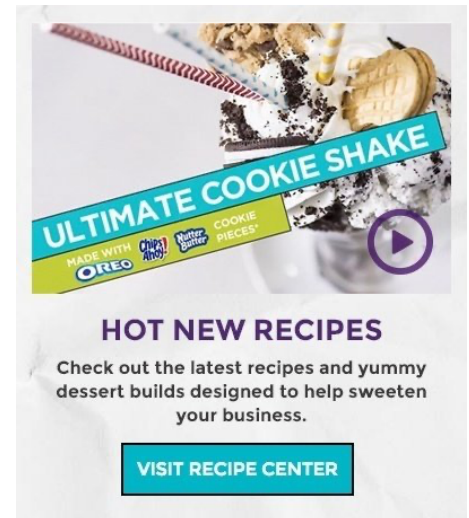
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Last year, however, some of those efforts were paused as the demand for things like single-use cutlery and single-use (or digital) menus became more of a focus due to widespread apprehension about whether COVID-19 could be transmitted through surfaces.

According to a consumer survey conducted by Technomic three months into the pandemic, consumers have been prioritizing “quality and safety characteristics of packaging over convenience factors (such as eating directly from the packaging) and sustainability (like reusable or eco-friendly packaging).”⁴

Sustainable packaging initiatives may again become more common, however. Although consumers rated the ability to maintain food and beverage temperature, separate compartments that prevent foods from mixing, and tamper-proof seals as the packaging qualities that mattered most to them in 2020, 39% also cited eco-friendly packaging as important or extremely important.⁴

“Safety is still top of mind for consumers,” Mills says. But once safety concerns have eased, consumers may well shift back to more eco-friendly options, she adds.

A New Take on Takeout

Pandemic-driven packaging innovation extended beyond meeting the increased demand for quality and safety, however.

According to Howe, some operators used their packaging as a vehicle for promoting certain dayparts. “I’ve seen some interesting packaging [during the pandemic] that’s not about being sanitary as much as creative ways to think about lunch,” she says, pointing to lunch boxes and bento boxes as examples. “It’s almost like a nostalgia for lunch—and trying to create special packaging around the lunchtime hour to drive traffic and get people back to [that] eating occasion,” she adds.

Looking ahead, operators may be able to build seasonal promotions around outdoor dining opportunities, such as hosting a backyard brunch for Mother’s Day or family barbecue over Memorial Day weekend. Because many people are still reluctant to share food with people outside their home, Howe says consumers will likely gravitate toward sandwiches, salads and other orders that can be packaged in single-serving portions and finished in one sitting—either at home or in the exterior dining areas that many restaurants plan to offer.

Take El Pollo Loco, for example. In December, the grilled chicken chain

announced two new restaurant models “designed to enhance off-premise convenience” in light of consumers’ COVID-era dining habits. The concepts allow customers to pick up and enjoy pre-ordered meals in an outdoor patio area or dining room with adjacent patio.⁵

Soon thereafter, Del Taco announced a new restaurant prototype featuring dedicated parking areas for customers who want to consume the concept’s Mexican-American fare from the comfort of their car.⁶

With patrons interested in spending more time outside, the restaurant of the future will probably feature more outdoor or quasi-covered space, Howe says—and operators may also benefit from including distinctive to-go order touches that help elevate al fresco dining opportunities. “The silverware and napkin could be in one plastic sleeve—or you could actually wrap disposable cutlery in a sustainable napkin holder,” she says. “If they’re going to enjoy something outside—and are not just eating on the go—people don’t want it to feel completely sterilized.”

In other words, she adds: Don’t forget the *experience* part of the foodservice experience.

The Implications for Noncommercial Operators

Investing in sustainable packaging solutions can pose challenges, of course. For noncommercial operators who stock their facilities with grab-and-go items, including individually wrapped snacks, participating in “the mission of sustainability” can be complicated, says Marcus Brady, director of national accounts for Mondelēz International Foodservice.

“When it comes to packaging, our approach is to understand what the customer’s current requirements are and what their packaging goals are,” he explains. “There tends to be a pretty large gap between present and future because right now, there aren’t a lot of economical solutions to reducing packaging for individually wrapped snacks.”

There’s also a long-term question to consider: Will the noncommercial space evolve from buying and selling individually wrapped products to buying and selling bulk? “That’s a train of thought our noncomm customers are definitely having,” Brady says. “But there are always tradeoffs.”

One potential tradeoff: food safety. “It’s a pressure point: Less packaging [can mean] a higher risk of food contamination,” he says. “Another pressure point if you go from packaged to bulk is labor, because now you need two to three people to constantly keep those spaces clean and presentable and stocked.” It’s unclear right now where the industry will ultimately go, he adds.

Nonetheless, as the past year has proved, foodservice operators—both commercial and noncommercial—are resilient and have become adept at managing through change. The packaging they use to keep food safe, visually appealing and delicious will no doubt continue to evolve as the industry does.

Wondering how to keep off-premises business booming even as on-premises dining ramps back up? Download our latest white paper, [5 Ways to Turn Up the Off-Premises Revenue Engine](#), to find out.

How Mondelēz Is Reducing Packaging Waste

Minimizing the environmental impact of plastic and packaging-related waste are urgent priorities for Mondelēz International.

The company, which [in 2018 committed to making all of its packaging recyclable by 2025](#), is well on its way: Currently, about [94% of its packaging](#) is recycle-ready or designed to be recycled. (Since 2013, Mondelēz has eliminated 65,000 tons of packing-related materials.)

In addition to joining with 29 major global companies to call on governments to adopt a [UN Treaty on Plastic Pollution](#), Mondelēz has committed to meet ambitious circular economy goals by 2025 by being part of the [U.S. Plastics Pact](#) led by the World Wildlife Fund and other organizations. In March 2020, Mondelēz International also joined two leading initiatives focused on tackling plastic waste and pollution: the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's [New Plastics Economy Global Commitment](#) and [New Plastics Economy initiative](#).

[Like Aramark](#), which has committed to significantly reducing single-use disposable plastics, Mondelēz International is combating plastic pollution. In March 2021, [Mondelēz announced](#) that it's working to reduce the use of virgin plastics in its packaging by at least 25%.

“Mondelēz is making packaging a priority, and Mondelēz International Foodservice is collaborating with [that larger corporate] effort to solve packaging issues within the noncommercial segment of our business,” says Director of National Accounts Marcus Brady. “We are having a lot of discussion around what the future of packaging is.”

Learn more on the [Mondelēz International website](#).

¹ [2021 State of the Restaurant Industry Report](#) (National Restaurant Association, December 2020)

² [2021 Foodservice Trends: A Look at the Road Ahead Report](#) (Mondelēz International Foodservice, December 2020)

³ [The State of Restaurant Sustainability 2018](#) (The National Restaurant Association, 2018)

⁴ [Delivery and Takeout Consumer Trend Report](#) (Technomic, 2020)

⁵ [El Pollo Loco Unveils New L.A. Mex Restaurant Design with Enhanced Off-Premise Convenience and Digital Footprint to Meet Evolving Customer Demand](#), Dec. 2, 2020

⁶ [Del Taco Debuts Reimagined Store Design with ‘Fresh Flex’ Prototype](#), Jan. 6, 2021

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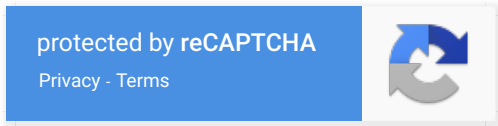
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