

## In & Out

The top 10 ideas to maximize grab-and-go fresh food and make your stores a destination By Renée M. Covino

**WITH MORE ON THEIR PLATES** at home and at work, consumers increasingly want in-and-out, quality, fresh food options, which means convenience store operators must ensure that their grab-and-go foodservice sections are on point at all times — day and night.

Here is a top 10 rundown of some of the best ideas and strategies in grab-and-go product assortment, packaging, merchandising, marketing and more:

### 1. Commit to Fresh

This seems obvious, but experts say there is still a hesitation in the convenience channel toward committing to the necessary labor and management that offering fresh food requires. Limited space is also a factor. However, to be successful, there can be no halfway commitment here. If a c-store wants to be a grab-and-go foodservice destination, it must be all in on the fresh-food commitment.

### 2. Partner With Local Vendors

Passport Café at the University of Richmond in Virginia is a convenience store-like retail operation with a grab-and-go selection that has grown and evolved since its opening in 2010. One of the significant ways Passport Café has grown is through partnerships with local vendors. Working with area businesses allows it to capitalize on their expertise and on the excellent quality of their goods.

“Customers are very aware of the local food movement,” Karen Kourkoulis, chef and

manager of Passport Café, told *Convenience Store News*. “When we partner with a local business, word-of-mouth travels quickly, and the quality of the products speak for themselves.”

### 3. Consistently Introduce Variety

Customers pick up on new items and trends, and are adventurous eaters when given the chance to explore new cuisines, according to Kourkoulis.

Dana Evaro, vice president of marketing for Land Mark Products Inc. — home of the Piccadilly Circus Pizza and Day’n Night Bites grab-and-go brands — agrees, and says part of this practice should be featuring limited-time offers (LTOs).

LTOs are important “to keep interest and create buzz,” Evaro told *CSNews*. As an example, he cited that Piccadilly Circus Pizza is working to replicate, for a limited time, popular flavors in other categories onto a pizza, such as the Big Mac and Nashville Chicken.

The LTO trend also includes new packaging and program ideas such as that of Dannon Foodservice and its recently launched Snack Hacks program, which is aimed at better-for-you snacking solutions. Each Snack Hacks recipe incorporates Dannon Oikos Greek Nonfat Yogurt, which is available in bulk sizes. This product can serve as a better-for-you ingredient swap in a variety of recipes because it is lower in fat and calories than full-fat sour cream, cream cheese or mayonnaise, according to the company.

The range of Snack Hacks recipe ideas include parfaits, overnight oats, hummus and salad options. Operators can sign up online to receive a free Snack Hacks kit that includes point-of-sale materials to use on-shelf, ready-made social media posts to promote products, and culinary inspiration for grab-and-go snacks.

### 4. Take Note of the Hybrid Flavor Trend

Data shows that grab-and-go consumers are enjoying hybrid flavor profiles right now, according to Evaro. With this in mind, Day’n Night Bites has created items like The Donut sandwich, which mixes the sweet taste of a cake doughnut with the savory tastes of traditional breakfast items, such as sausage, egg and cheese.

### 5. Don’t Expect a Long Shelf Life

“Fresh” and “long shelf life” should not co-exist, Evaro maintains. C-store retailers who are seriously



committed to fresh foodservice should consider the company cultures of all their grab-and-go suppliers, as well as their own culture.

“Every decision made needs to work toward giving the consumer the freshest and best food experience we possibly can. When that is achieved, sales will grow,” said Evaro.

### 6. Realize the Need for Speed

One of the most important factors in a successful grab-and-go fresh foodservice program is speed, as Altoona, Pa.-based convenience store chain Sheetz Inc. can attest. Through a partnership with SMG (Service Management Group), Sheetz found that for food-focused customers, speed of service is a top driver and offers the greatest opportunity.



“Not only is it the top driver of an experience with Sheetz, but it’s also a huge opportunity for us,” said Shianna Peace, program manager at Sheetz, which operates more than 565 stores throughout Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland, Ohio and North Carolina. Speed of service can help build customer loyalty, too, she added.

To increase speed, you must know where any delays stem from, according to Peace. Sheetz recently discovered that food-focused customers who have negative experiences are more likely to talk about inattentive store associates, overly long wait times, preparation errors and a lack of urgency.

When customers perceive a good attitude and helpfulness from associates and also experience speedy service, that’s when they’re most likely to return, Peace explained. “It’s when fast meets friendly,” she said.

She highlighted Sheetz #587, where a general push to just “do things faster” didn’t work out recently. The store saw its lowest satisfaction ratings at lunch and dinner, so it took steps to address problems with speed at those times. This included 30-minute cleanliness checks of the store’s Fizz City offering and seating area, along with a cashier/kitchen support plan that provides a procedure for getting assistance when foodservice orders begin to stack up. As a result, the store’s satisfaction ratings have improved.

### 7. Consider Going the Extra “Made-to-Order” Mile

Customers do know the difference between “fresh grab-and-go” and “made to order.” Both are appealing, but made to order offers the “much-in-demand customization that the age 16-30 demographic wants,” according to Evaro. So, if this is your target, it might make sense to branch out and invest in the labor and space needed for made to order.

### 8. Mirror the Food With Fresh & Fun In-Store Advertising

Rather than just displaying its weekly specials, Passport Café at the University of Richmond finds ways to introduce them in a new light.

“We’ve displayed specific ingredients that might be fun to see in their original state before cooked or processed,” Kourkoulis explained. An example of this is the jicama slaw that accompanies the store’s jerk chicken special. “We placed unprocessed jicama on display, which looks completely different before it is peeled and julienned for a slaw,” she said. “It catches people’s interest and makes for great conversation.”

### 9. Invest in Appropriate Personnel

When done right, the investment in fresh grab-and-go runs deep within a c-store chain — right through to the personnel. Those looking to be serious contenders should consider creating new positions to manage the focus, just as York, Pa.-based Rutter’s did recently when it promoted Cheri Booth to the new position of fresh and local category manager. The convenience store chain said it created this role “to help meet emerging consumer needs as they show increased demand for local, fresh and healthier products.”

Booth previously served as foodservice quality assurance manager for the family-owned company, which operates more than 60 locations throughout central Pennsylvania and West Virginia. She reports to Ryan Krebs, director of foodservice, and oversees all aspects of local, fresh procurement. This includes produce, seasonal fruits and vegetables, foodservice, snacks, beverages, beer and wine.

### 10. Mull Over a Really Big Idea

Perhaps no best practice is more in line with the grab-and-go proposition than a drive-thru. If a convenience store operator is truly serious about grab-and-go food and willing to tackle the challenges and reap the opportunities, a drive-thru is worth consideration.

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This move is a really big one, worthy of its own set of best practices, put in place by fast-food leaders, such as: a willingness to invest in improvement; taking the time to do it right; demonstrating continuous reinvention and improvement; and putting the same design and operations focus on the drive-thru as the interior.

Speaking at last year's *Convenience Store News* Convenience Foodservice & Beverage Exchange event, Thomas Cook, principal at King-Casey, pointed to In-N-Out Burger and Starbucks as drive-thru standouts in terms of superior customer service and a unique brand experience, respectively. When lines get long, In-N-Out Burger employees will bring tablets to car windows to take face-to-face orders, while Starbucks has begun to provide the interior customer experience to drivers by adding a video barista at the drive-thru.

For c-stores, drive-thrus are still in their infancy, according to Cook. Only a handful of players — Parker's, Swiss Farms, Square One Markets and Farm Stores — have added them. A few of these focus solely on foodservice.

For c-store drive-thrus to work, the operator must not view adding one as merely "gluing" it onto an existing store, Cook advised. Drive-thrus require increased staffing, as well as new store designs and logistics to accommodate it. Retailers may also err by

trying to sell everything through the drive-thru, rather than focusing on foodservice and beverages.

C-store operators that do plan to add drive-thrus should learn from fast-food leaders and "copy shamelessly," Cook said. They must also take the time to plan carefully; start small and scale up as they learn from experience; start with a laser-focus on foodservice; and be willing to make the investment in store layout, operations and personnel. **CSN**

