



Taste This

Food processors refine in-store sampling

I have a confession to make: I'm a sucker for in-store sampling. I've often walked out of a store with products I had no intention of buying all because I had tried them and they tasted really, really good.

In-store sampling may seem a little pedestrian when compared to sleek flashy print or television ads. But it's still one of the most effective ways to get in front of your customers and have them try your product – especially if you're a small- to mid-size manufacturer. It just may not be the most cost effective. Karen Hope, managing partner of Calgary's Cattle Boyz Foods Limited (makers of barbecue sauces), says often "if you give out 200 samples you might see that 10 bottles were sold. So it's never cost effective, but by the same token, if you have an untried product, a new product, you have to start somewhere."

What makes food sampling effective is having a demo person who's knowledgeable about the product he or she is serving. Christena McDonald explains that you can't just put any demo person in a store anymore, you have to have someone who knows the product, its advantages and its unique qualities, and who can convey all this to customers. McDonald is president of Ajax, Ont.-based Consumer



Mass Connections, a California-based company that specializes in in-store events and promotions, released a retail industry study in April. The study, which looked at all in-store events, found that 86 per cent of customers surveyed said they would buy products they had sampled in a store.

Concepts Corp., which offers in-store sampling services. "Customers are just so well-informed today," she says. "It's critical to be that much further ahead."

Matthew von Teichman, president of Toronto's Life Choices Natural Foods, suggests taking it even further. When and where possible, von Teichman will try to set up demo booths without going through an in-store sampling provider. In this way he ensures that the demonstrators are educated not only on the product they're serving, but also on the company's whole line. "They're more enthusiastic about what we do – especially because we're talking about health-related products. Often they have a health background or they may be nutritionists or at least have some grounding in natural foods," he says.

He also looks for people who fit the image of the products – someone who is fit and healthy. And, he adds, when Life Choices does its own sampling the server

will try to draw in the demographic the company is interested in. "So you're actually sampling a lot more product to a more relevant audience," says von Teichman, "which is why I guess we have so much success with it."

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IN-STORE SAMPLING: WHAT TO CONSIDER

- If you want to set up your own sampling kiosk, check with the store first as many work with a provider.
- Set your objectives. Do you want to do a mass sampling or do you want the server to spend more time with targeted consumers?
- Define your target consumer. If you work with a provider, you may get a list of stores you could go into. Either pick the ones that match your target or pick the products in your lineup that best match each store's demographic.
- Think about creative cross promotions. If you're sampling soup, for example, find a demo partner that sells crackers. This way you can also split the costs.
- Use sampling as a way to educate customers about your products.
- Highlight what's different about your product or its best selling points.
- Ensure your server is enthusiastic about the product.
- If you're sampling one product from your lineup, consider displaying others on the counter.
- Ensure that servers are trained to deal with difficult customers.
- In-store sampling is not just for new products. Consider sampling if you've reformulated your product or if you've given it a new package.
- Offer coupons to encourage customers to buy the product that day.
- Ensure the presentation is sanitary.
- Expect an in-store sampling program to set you back anywhere from \$200 to \$400 for two to three days.