

Post-Millennial Consumer Outlook

Processors look ahead to the needs of today's children



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Preteens and teenagers are busier, more sophisticated, and have more pressures today than those of past generations. They are overloaded with homework and overscheduled with extracurricular activities, all in an environment of intense competition to achieve. Consider that they also are undergoing a level of physical morphing not seen since infancy and it is even more important that their developing bodies and brains are supported by good nutrition.

Many children of school age are either picking at their food while completing homework or grabbing a quick breakfast as they run out the door. Then, when hunger hits, they eat more by feel than by thought. Simply put, kids are not known for planning their meals in advance.

These are just some of the factors packaged food companies are considering when turning to the market segment serving preteens and teens. Their goal is to create new foods that will fit the fast-paced lifestyles of youngsters with little time to spare, yet provide the right nutrition in flavors and formats that put them at the forefront of the “grab-and-go” decision.

Creating convenient food for a busy person isn’t a new concept. But unlike adults, preteens and teens are still growing and developing at incredibly rapid rates, so they need more food—and more out of the food they eat.

Where to Take It

Too many children’s diets are calorie- rich but nutritionally poor. In looking at the nutrition gaps, the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans singled out four major “nutrients of concern”: calcium, vitamin D, potassium, and fiber. At least half of the US population isn’t getting enough of these important nutrients.

This creates an excellent opportunity for more dairy-based foods and beverages, because milk is loaded with the first three nutrients of concern—calcium, potassium, and vitamin D. As for the fourth ingredient of concern, savvy dairy foods developers have been adding fiber to their products. For example, some are incorporating inulin into yogurt. Since milk also has nine essential nutrients, any product that can include milk or yogurt as an ingredient has a lot going for it.

Got protein? Most children do get enough—but do they get it early enough? Not always, according to one landmark study. Even with more schools offering breakfast, the study showed that too many kids are skipping that “most important meal.” Also, most younger children eat breakfast, but by middle school, only half do. And by high school, only about one-third of students eat breakfast daily.

Sometimes, food insecurity can be the reason for skipping breakfast, but often, students say there’s no time or they

don't like the food offered at home or school. It should also be noted that this isn't just an American phenomenon. Research conducted in suburban Iran showed the same results. Kids are kids everywhere.

With diligence, it is possible to attain great success caring for and feeding the moody and ever-changing teen.

Sitting down to eat is a challenge for today's kids. The "one-handed" breakfast, such as a bar that allows for eating while multitasking, is fast becoming the rule. For older kids who drive, "dashboard dining" is a common scene. Mess-proof foods are thus particularly attractive.

Fiber Fit

Today's children are usually fiber-deficient. Most Americans get, at best, 12-15g fiber daily—half or less than half of the recommended 25-30g. Given that teens and preteens also don't get enough fruits and vegetables, their fiber intake is likely below even that of the average American.

Some ingredients that provide exemplary forms of fiber include bean and pea flours, as well as chicory root. The latter is a chief source of inulin, a fermentable prebiotic fiber that helps feed the growth of healthy bacteria in the g.i. tract.

Chicory root fiber is well tolerated and can be solubilized into drinks, making it ideal for smoothies, yogurts, and solids like cookies and bars.

Other fibers include resistant starch from sources such as green bananas, high-amylose maize, or wheat, rice, and potatoes. Resistant starch from high-amylose maize is especially good for baked items, including leavened foods. Unlike many fibers, it does not increase the density of the finished product, but can actually increase product volume slightly.

Bean flours are being used successfully in pastas, pizza crusts, crackers, and chips—all foods that kids enjoy. High-fiber flours and starches from chick peas, beans, and peas often contain higher levels of protein than standard wheat-based products, too.

Bean and pea chips and snacks are gluten-free as well, so in addition to covering a lot of nutritional ground, they're on trend and thus highly acceptable to today's kids. They hit all targets with high nutrition, convenient eating, and great flavor.

Sugar Management

With added sugar labeling rearing its head, natural alternative sweeteners are being applied across a broader range of foods and beverages, especially those aimed at children.

Sugar substitutes are all safe but they have “perception baggage.” Plant-based sweeteners such as from stevia and monk fruit are the most popular. Their use in beverages, from flavored water to smoothies, is ideal as a means of making all the calories in a product count. New masking technologies have brought the flavor profiles of products using them closer to their sucrose-sweetened versions.

Monk fruit has an advantage in that it is permitted for use in chocolate-flavored milk while still allowing the result to be called simply “chocolate milk.” Stevia is expected to obtain approval as well, but currently chocolate milk must be called a “flavored dairy beverage” if sweetened with stevia. Yogurt drinks and smoothies, however, do not fall into this category of restriction.

Today’s preparations are “not your mother’s stevia.” More than 40 sweet compounds have been isolated from the stevia leaf. Some are better in beverages; others are more useful in yogurts, puddings, and grain-based products. Sweetener technologists can fine-tune a stevia-based sweetener system to suit very specific needs.

Oil’s Well

Finding inventive ways to add omega-3 oils is a huge plus. Most kids don’t get enough of these important nutrients that are key components in brain and nerve tissues. Plant sources of alpha-linoleic acid (ALA), while not as bioavailable as eicosapentanoic acid (EPA) or docosahexanoic acid (DHA) from marine sources, have benefited from ingredient technology that brought them much closer to parity during the past decade. Moreover, plant sources such as ground flax or chia and other high-ALA seeds include other nutrients, such as minerals and fiber.

There also are formats for marine-derived EPA and DHA that avoid any of the fishy notes typically associated with those compounds. Masking technology using everything from vanilla and concord grape concentrate to mushroom micelle extracts have proven particularly effective.

Start from Scratch

The challenge for developers and manufacturers is that while numerous food products touting health and nutrition are marketed to kids, many fall short. They typically contain only a minimal amount of the “really good stuff,” the full nutrient complement that kids require. Even when such products really are better than their standard alternatives, they still don’t make much true impact on a child’s overall health.

A new generation of product makers has been approaching this challenge differently. For example, Peas of Mind LLC set out to create new ways for kids to eat vegetables, focusing on formats already known to be favorites among young ones. The company’s product line covers any kid’s “greatest hits” list by including veggie French fries, veggie tots, veggie milkshakes, and pizza with vegetable crusts. Think: “diner food” reinvented.

When creating new products, Peas of Mind’s starting point is one serving of vegetables. The team will actually take, for example, a serving of raw broccoli and place it on the table, assessing every aspect. Other companies might start with a broccoli purée and think of it as an add-in, But this relegates the beneficial nutritional value of the ingredient to a secondary position.

In this example, that can be literal, because broccoli purée is made up of broccoli and water, so the nutritional value of the broccoli is getting diluted at the start. Peas of Mind takes whole broccoli florets and turns them into products like broccoli tots, broccoli French fries, and pizza crusts. The end products must contain whole servings of vegetables, not just vegetables as an inclusion.

Whole Body Approach

A new trend in product development is to create products for the body as a whole, instead of creating for a specific dietary need. This “whole body” philosophy is supported by the American Academy of Pediatrics. The organization “urges schools and families to take a broader approach to nutrition, considering children’s whole diet pattern—rather than the amount of sugar, fat, or specific nutrients in individual foods.”

This holistic approach is more of a challenge when dealing with a group that has a less-structured—if any—definition of what comprises an eating occasion. The reality is, the biggest meal of the day for most children is the 8:00AM through 8:00PM “snack.”

When it comes to kids’ snacking, Somersault Life Co. takes a whole body approach when creating its products. “Somersaults are a well-balanced snack, based on a careful combination of protein, fiber, and healthy fats to keep kids—and adults—satiated,” says Courtney Lytle, one of the company’s directors. “All protein in our products comes from natural, plant-based sources, without soy fillers.”

Each variety of Somersault snacks has a higher amount of protein than it does sugar. This arose from a specific effort on the part of the Somersault R&D team to ensure its young consumers are enjoying the best combination of nutrients. Somersaults stand out in the market as one of the few high-protein snacks that get that protein from sunflower seeds. This has an added advantage of making the tree nut-free line suitable for the classroom lunchbox of today.

Fewer Ingredients

Many products must stand out for what they don’t have as much as for what they do have. This is particularly important for Ruby’s Naturals Inc., makers of the Ruby Rockets line of dairy-free fruit- and vegetable-based popsicles and “yogurt” tubes.

“It’s not so much what we put in our products, but what we will not use,” says Steve Davis, company president and CEO. “We don’t add sugar into the Ruby’s line of products. The sweetness comes from fruits, vegetables, and a little monk fruit. Too often, in the categories in which we compete—frozen novelties and

yogurt—sugar has become a real issue. Many novelties and yogurts over-rely on sugar to deliver a taste impact for their products. We aim to be different.”

Davis further explains that “free from” has been a foundation of all Ruby’s products since the company’s inception, and they contain no chemicals or artificial ingredients. “From there, our product development process has naturally led us into a stable of products that are dairy-free, gluten-free, and vegan, delivering a brand that is really inclusive,” he adds.

But how to get the kids to actually eat these products is the real question. It is a common response among kid-specific packaged food companies that during the R&D process they involve both the parent and child. Initially, they target the parent’s need and then create a product the kids will eat.

Heather Stouffer, CEO of Mom Made Foods Inc., applies this method. “We solicit input from parents about the features that resonate with them, such as antibiotic-free meats, nothing artificial, USDA organic, low sodium, etc. Then we taste-test with kids throughout the development process,” she explains.

Mom Made makes convenient organic meals for kids ranging from meatball bites to cheesy mac. “At Mom Made, we work diligently to produce a meal that the kids will look at and want to dig into,” says Stouffer. “This means, for example, that any particulates of spices or herbs need to be very small. And the texture of a sauce needs to be well blended. If using noodles, they must be cooked just right. Overall, the meal needs to feel accessible to the youth, not intimidating.”

Those food companies that are able to adapt their products and steer new development to meet the nutritional needs of these future movers and shakers will capture the market share.

With diligence, it is possible to attain great success caring for and feeding the moody and ever-changing teen.

For more articles by regular contributors Dr. Ayoob and Ms. Litwin, check out ["Food for Kids of All Ages,"](#) ["Good to Grow On,"](#) ["Foods and Beverages for Infants and Toddlers,"](#) and others at www.preparedfoods.com.

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Good News/Bad News

The prevalence of obesity among younger children seems to be flattening, according to statistics from the Centers for Disease Control. On the other hand, obesity levels are inching up among teens. Obesity rates for all kids 2-19 years average 17%, but among teens, the average is 20.5%. All the more reason why it is important for product developers in this channel to build in big nutrition without big calories.

Preteens and teens have something in common: They can be stubborn when it comes to trying new foods or taking advice on what they need to eat for optimal nutrition and a balanced diet. Even using the words “balanced diet” with kids raises the specter of “no taste, no fun, no enjoyment.” Yet these challenges also

highlight why this demographic is an ideal target for packaged food companies. Developers need to focus R&D efforts on creating new foods that fit into the fast-paced, digitally centered lifestyles today's kids lead.

Teens and preteens don't have to be feared, but just how to get them to eat—and enjoy—healthful foods is the real question. During the R&D process, it's critical for food makers to engage comprehensive focus groups that involve children alone as well as parents and children together. In this way, companies can target the parents' needs and then create a product kids will want to eat, while hitting a specific set of nutritional benchmarks.

Just Say No

One ingredient being taken by teens and even preteens in alarming numbers is caffeine. Although demand for caffeinated drinks is higher than ever among teens, responsible processors should take the lead and avoid using it in products designed for the under-18 crowd. Simply put, caffeine is a drug. Makers of colas and other caffeinated carbonated beverages already are under pressure. Even more so, makers of energy drinks that contain added caffeine or other stimulants, especially alkaloids, could soon invite legal repercussions and regulatory reactions. (Remember Joe Camel?) As tempting as it is to serve such demands, doing so can end up backfiring.

Recent Articles By Jill Litwin

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In spite of a degree in mathematics from Syracuse University and graduate school at the Fashion Institute of Technology, Jill Litwin went on to become the founder and CEO of San Francisco-based Peas of Mind LLC, makers of all-natural and innovative frozen food for growing kids. She can be reached at jill@peasofmind.com.



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