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Supermarket Meal Kits

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Retailers are offering them in-store and via online delivery services for customer convenience.

Meal kit delivery services have become all the rage. They were first introduced online by meal kit companies, and now many major supermarket chains have caught on to the trend and are offering them to consumers in stores and online.

Meal kits feature groupings of ingredients needed to make a specific recipe, offering convenience to customers who may not have time to shop or cook but still want a healthful meal to prepare quickly at home. Some grocery stores work with dietitians to develop healthful meal kit options, while others partner with well-known online companies such as HelloFresh and Home Chef.

Supermarket meal kit programs vary depending on the chain, but many are similar to online meal kit company services in that they gather, portion, and package ingredients for a specific meal. However, supermarkets' meal kits often are lower in price, sold in brick and mortar locations, and don't require subscriptions.

Who's Buying and Why

In 2017, the popularity of meal kits grew exponentially, generating \$154.6 million in sales, or a year-over-year increase of 26.5%.¹ Recent data show that most meal kit buyers are single, urban-dwelling millennials, particularly men. However, they're also popular among young families with children in both urban and rural areas and households with an annual income of more than \$70,000.²

Many of these consumers buy meal kits because they're viewed as time savers. The kits reduce the time it takes to plan, prepare, and cook meals and often are perceived as more healthful alternatives to the prepared foods available in supermarket delis.

"People are really looking for convenient ways to eat healthfully, and they still want to cook," says Emily Parent, RD, LD, retail dietitian for Coborn's in Minnesota. "I think that's why online grocery shopping and meal kits have become so popular."

Whether sold online or in grocery stores, meal kits offer convenience, but those sold specifically in supermarkets provide additional benefits. For example, consumers who buy meal kits in supermarkets don't have to pay for a monthly subscription. Also, since many consumers buy meal kits individually instead of purchasing one week's worth of meals that may spoil before they can be eaten, there's less food waste. And supermarket meal kits tend to be more economically priced since they require less packaging than online subscription services that use large boxes with cooling packs and protective wrapping for long-distance shipping. This is significant—60% of those who purchase meal kits say value for the money is extremely important.¹

The following are profiles of popular meal kit programs offered in four major supermarket chains across the country.

Coborn's Inc.

Coborn's meal kits, To the Table, which have been available to customers since 2016, are offered exclusively online through the Coborn's Delivers grocery delivery service in the Minneapolis area. At the launch of the meal kit program, Parent recognized the need for more healthful options and was subsequently asked to join the meal kit team.

Coborn's releases eight meal kit recipes four times per year that coincide with the seasons. While the recipes change each season, Parent says it's not uncommon to see certain recipes reappear if they were successful the previous year.

The fall 2018 offerings (which run through December) feature recipes such as Honey Mustard Glazed Salmon, Pork Chop Rice Casserole With Squash Blend and Rolls, Stuffed Acorn Squash, and Overnight Apple, Raisin, and Cinnamon Oats. Some kits have prechopped ingredients such as onions and bell peppers, while others don't. Parent says the local traditional recipes, such as the tater tot hotdish, featuring cream of mushroom soup, ground beef, and sautéed vegetables topped with tater tots, seem to be most popular.

Each recipe goes through rigorous testing before it becomes a meal kit. Members of the meal kit team are invited to contribute recipe ideas, which then are scrutinized and critiqued as a group. To provide further feedback, Coborn's employees who aren't on the meal kit team test the recipes by making the kit exactly as instructed for their families.

Coborn's goal is to ensure that one-half of the recipes meet the "Dietitian's Choice" criteria, meaning they're to be under 600 kcal and contain less than 650 mg sodium. Fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins are incorporated into the Dietitian's Choice meal kits, Parent says. The meal kits that aren't labeled "Dietitian's Choice" don't follow any specific nutrition criteria, although all kits meet a preparation time limit of no more than 45 minutes from unboxing to eating, except for slow-cooker recipes.

The cost of the meal kits ranges between \$25 and \$30, with each kit containing either two to four or four to six servings.

Parent believes the freshness of Coborn's meal kits, which are packaged to order and made fresh daily, is a big bonus. But while freshness is important to consumers, she believes the convenience factor is the main reason the meal kits have been so successful.

The Kroger Co.

Kroger began selling its meal kits, Prep+Pared, in December 2017.³ The meal kits feature proportioned, prepared ingredients that are packaged/boxed together to make one specific recipe. They're available for delivery to customers through Kroger's partnership with Instacart but also are sold in stores. Depending on the store's layout, shoppers can find the meal kits in various locations but mostly near the bistro or prepared foods area.

Like Parent, Ashley Martinez, MFN, RD, LD, wasn't initially involved in creating meal kits for Kroger, but she recognized their potential to appeal to customers who wanted more healthful options and began working with the culinary innovations team to create the Dietitian's Pick criteria. The team meets regularly to test recipes, which are created by a designated chef. The recipes go through two rounds of taste testing before they become meal kits.

The Prep+Pared program features eight meal kits, which rotate every month. Each meal kit includes a vegetarian and two Dietitian's Pick options. Martinez says the "Dietitian's Pick" meal kits contain between 400 and 600 kcal, 7 g or less of saturated fat, 750 mg or less of sodium, a maximum of 60 g

net carbohydrate, and a minimum of 10 g protein. The meal kits not labeled "Dietitian's Pick" don't follow any specific nutritional guidelines, though Martinez is always reviewing recipes to make them more healthful.

All Prep+Pared meal kits have a cooking time of about 20 minutes. Each meal kit serves two and ranges in price between \$14 and \$20. Just as the name implies, everything in the meal kit is already prepped, meaning all the customer has to do is cook—no chopping, cutting, or dicing is required. Martinez says this offers added convenience because many meal kits include packaged ingredients for a recipe but require more prep work before cooking.

To add to its offerings, Kroger recently acquired Home Chef, a Chicago-based online meal kit delivery service that delivers more than 3 million meals per month across the United States.⁴ According to Kroger's website, Home Chef is available only online, but there are plans to sell them in stores.⁵

When ordering Home Chef online, customers can choose meals that feed two to six people and purchase two to six meals for the week that fit into various criteria such as vegetarian, low calorie, or low carbohydrate.⁶ The meals cost \$9.95 per serving, with free delivery on orders over \$45; otherwise, there's a \$10 delivery charge.

ShopRite

ShopRite takes a nontraditional approach to meal kits by offering what Natalie Menza-Crowe, MS, RD, director of health and wellness, calls "meal solutions" through its Meals Made Well program.

Meals Made Well doesn't include your typical meal kits that are boxed or packaged. Instead, ShopRite displays all of the ingredients needed for featured recipes separately, but in one place. Customers simply choose the ingredients, place them in their carts, and go.

Each week, the retailer focuses on marketing four recipes in the Meals Made Well program. The recipes are advertised online, in store, and in circular ads. When customers walk into select stores, they can find a Meals Made Well display near the entrance, which features recipe cards for the four highlighted recipes and all the ingredients needed to make them. In addition, the display features a video loop of someone making the recipes, and in-store dietitians perform live demonstrations of the recipes throughout the week.

When customers shop online through the ShopRite From Home grocery delivery service, they can find the same recipes and videos. Customers then can click to add recipes to their online cart, which automatically adds all needed ingredients for purchase. Customers have the option to subtract any ingredients they may not need.

Although there are only four recipes highlighted each week, the overall ShopRite online recipe database has thousands of recipes, and the Meals Made Well section features hundreds of chef-inspired and dietitian-approved recipes—all of which are available to add to the online shopping cart with the click of a button.

A team of dietitians, chefs, and marketers create the Meals Made Well recipes. The team meets monthly to share new recipes and plan which ones will be marketed for the upcoming months. Menza-Crowe says the focus is affordability, ease in preparation, healthfulness, and taste.

The team, which tries to create recipes using few ingredients, aims to incorporate items that most customers already have in the pantry such as olive oil and pepper, focusing less on obscure spices that could cost more. Although the recipes are dietitian approved, Menza-Crowe says the team doesn't follow strict guidelines, choosing to focus on overall health and forming a consensus among the dietitians. She says some of the more popular dishes have been fish tacos and those with trendy ingredients such as cauliflower.

When deciding which recipes to feature each week, the team aims to promote dishes that have ingredients on sale to make them more affordable for customers. Menza-Crowe says the program has had tremendous success and believes that forgoing the preportioned ingredients offers numerous benefits to customers. "This way is inexpensive for the customer; they're getting more food and can scale it to how many servings they need. It's also more affordable because there's no labor or packaging costs," she says, adding that the Meals Made Well program is a convenience to customers that has benefits beyond a traditional meal kit.

Ahold Delhaize USA—Giant Food

Although not available for delivery, Giant Food is offering its customers the chance to try a well-known meal kit brand at a more affordable price. In June 2018, the retailer announced a partnership with HelloFresh, one of the most well-known meal kit companies.⁷

Previously, Giant Food produced its own private label brand of meal kits, but Paul Chapman, director of bakery and deli for Giant Food, says there was a void in its meal kit category. "HelloFresh has excellent brand equity and is already known as one of the top meal kit subscribing companies in the world, so it seemed like the obvious choice," he says.

Chapman says the partnership allows each company to leverage its brand by promoting one another. The deal brings HelloFresh to more than 580 Giant Food and Stop & Shop stores, which are owned by Ahold Delhaize USA.

Giant Food carries four to five HelloFresh meal kits at a time, including recipes such as Mozzarella Chicken, Peppercorn Steak, Mediterranean Style Chicken, and Homestyle Meatloaf. Chapman says the offerings are rotated every few months and all recipes are exclusive to Giant Food customers, meaning consumers can't purchase them from HelloFresh's website. The meal kits are available in the prepared foods section.

Ordering weekly meal kits from HelloFresh online typically costs \$59 for a veggie or classic box with three meals for two people, while a family box of three meals for four people usually costs about \$96. However, because in-store customers don't have to subscribe to the program or pay for shipping, the kits available at Giant Food are considerably less expensive. (The meal kits serve two and are priced between \$14.99 and \$19.99, a cost as low as \$7.50 per serving.)

Meal Kits Abound

In addition to these four retailers, there are dozens more grocery store chains across the country offering meal kits and meal kit delivery services—and the numbers continue to grow.

Blue Apron, another well-known meal kit delivery company, recently announced a partnership with Costco, offering kits at a 30% discount compared with what they sell for online.⁸ Albertsons recently acquired the meal kit company Plated and announced plans to have the meal kits available in hundreds of stores, including Albertsons, Safeway, Vons, and Jewel-Osco by the end of 2018.⁹ The meal kits also will be available for delivery to customers through its partnership with Instacart.

And supermarkets continue to produce private-label meal kits. For example, the popular Texas retailer HEB has enjoyed success with its Meal Simple kits.

Amazon also sells its own private-label meal kits, which are available for delivery through AmazonFresh.¹⁰ Moreover, Walmart has begun making its own branded meal kits, with plans to sell them in at least 2,000 stores by the end of 2018.

A Promising Future

The establishment of more supermarket meal kit programs as well as the formation of additional partnerships may be around the corner as meal kits in grocery stores continue to thrive and online meal

kit companies struggle to keep subscribers. Dietitians should investigate meal kit options in their area, as they may be a convenient way for clients and patients to eat healthful, home-cooked meals.

— *Esther L. Ellis, MS, RD, LDN, is a retail dietitian and freelance writer based in New Orleans.*

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