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Increasing Produce Intake

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Today's Dietitian speaks with retail RDs across the country who share creative ways to boost fruit and vegetable consumption among shoppers.

March marks the arrival of National Nutrition Month®. The theme, "Go Further With Food," encourages people to make healthful food choices while being mindful of food waste.¹ The theme changes each year, but the underlying message of healthful eating is always present, and at its foundation is the encouragement to eat more fruits and vegetables. An ideal place to share this message is the grocery store, where retail dietitians can play a pivotal role in promoting fruits and vegetables in all forms. To adapt to changing technologies and patrons, retail dietitians are incorporating new and innovative ways to boost produce consumption among shoppers.

Why Fruits and Veggies Matter

According to the 2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, roughly three-quarters of the population consumes a diet low in fruits and vegetables.² When US shoppers do buy produce, the Food Marketing Institute found that 64% purchase it at supermarkets.³ This provides retail RDs with a rare opportunity to encourage and educate customers where they shop.

Other sources indicate even greater shortfalls. "According to a newly released report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2015, just 9% of adults met the intake recommendations for vegetables, and only 12% of adults met the recommendations for fruit," says Wendy Reinhardt Kapsak, MS, RDN, president and CEO of the Produce for Better Health Foundation. "As natural produce promoters, retail dietitians are perfectly positioned to make a real impact in the everyday lives of Americans."

In-Store Promotions

Redner's Markets

Meredith McGrath, RD, LDN, is the dietitian for Redner's Markets, which consists of 44 stores in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware, and she manages the chain's nutrition communications and marketing efforts. When McGrath started 10 years ago, she oversaw the HealthCents program, a marketing initiative that encourages healthful eating. The initiative features messages and recipes promoting fruits and vegetables in the store magazine, circular ad, and on in-store signage. Five years later, McGrath saw an opportunity to increase the outreach and started the TasteStation program, which enables shoppers to try samples of produce highlighted in the HealthCents messaging.

"As I talk to our vendor community, I always try to get them to understand the benefits of both worlds," McGrath says. "It's about getting the food into the customer's mouths and showing them how to cut an avocado or what to do with a mango. It's those things that we take for granted, assuming people know what to do with it, but they don't."

McGrath takes advantage of outside resources such as vendor partners and commodity boards, which she says are always willing to send materials that bring excitement to the in-store demonstration. After using an outside demo company for three weeks, McGrath convinced Redner's to allow store staff members to conduct the food demonstrations.

"When we started using our own folks who are in the store and already have a relationship with the customer, it completely took off," says McGrath, explaining that the designated staff members took pride in their selection and were more knowledgeable about the store. "Now, when you look at it five years later, it has really become a destination in our store, and it's an amazing thing."

United Supermarkets

Another chain that successfully markets produce in-store is United Supermarkets in Texas and New Mexico, where Karleigh Jurek, MS, RDN, LD, and two other dietitians work alongside the marketing department to create promotions. Jurek recalls the chain's more recent and most successful campaign, "Color Your Basket." The year-long promotion featured a monthly color and encouraged shoppers to fill their baskets with products of that color by publicizing their health benefits, cooking methods, and recipes. The campaign involved promoting products throughout the store but focused heavily on fruits and vegetables. The marketing was concentrated in stores with flyers and shelf signs, but the themes also were tied to dietitian newsletters and television segments.

"I think that one resonated with a lot of people because no one wants to hear the dietitian say, 'eat more fruits and vegetables'; they've already heard it before," Jurek says. "Instead, we were saying, 'eat your colors,' and it made it more interesting and fun."

Kwik Trip

When Erica Flint, RD, CD, started at Kwik Trip four years ago, the chain already was selling produce in its 500-plus convenience stores across Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa. But Flint says the company needed someone to spearhead the promotion of fruits and vegetables through programs and initiatives, and that's where she took over.

One method of encouraging produce consumption is through price. "Value is important to our guests, so we promote our produce through discount promotions," Flint says. "Apples, oranges, and pears run three for \$1 several times a year, and we offer a combination option where they can pair a sandwich with a fresh fruit cup and water at a discounted price."

With Flint's help, Kwik Trip was the first convenience store to participate in Partnership for a Healthier America, partly by increasing the square footage dedicated to fresh produce. Partnership for a Healthier America is a nonprofit organization that strives to increase healthful options in private sector businesses to combat childhood obesity. Not only has Flint increased the space allotted to produce and decreased its price but she's also influenced its placement. When customers walk in, the first items they see are fresh fruits and vegetables.

Harmons Grocery

In 2011, dietitians at Harmons Grocery played a crucial role in piloting healthy checkout lanes, substituting the typical candy bars, chips, and soda for more healthful options such as fruits, vegetables, and water.

Fresh fruit in healthy checkout lanes covers an entire shelf and is sold for a cheaper price than what's featured in the produce department. Healthy checkout lanes also feature coolers filled with bottled water, sparkling water, fruit and yogurt parfaits, and fresh cut vegetables. "We got a lot of positive feedback, especially from parents shopping with kids," says Laura Holtrop Kohl, MS, RD. "The initiative matches with the direction of the company and its focus on health and wellness." What started as two lanes has now evolved into 34 healthy checkouts in 17 stores.

Northgate González Market

Northgate González Market started healthy checkout lanes as a collaboration with Los Angeles County Public Health. While the chain has had success with healthy checkouts, its in-store events are what shine. Teresa Blanco was hired in 2010 as the health and wellness director after the company decided

to focus more on its patrons' well-being. Currently, Blanco organizes 65 in-store events each month in 40 stores in Southern California featuring free health screenings, food demos of fruits and vegetables, and health education. Though Blanco isn't an RD, she understands the value of the profession and incorporates dietitians and other health professionals in each event.

Community Outreach

Hy-Vee

In addition to in-store programs, retail dietitians are stepping outside brick and mortar settings to promote fruit and vegetable consumption within their communities. Through Hy-Vee's One Step program, dietitians play an instrumental role in building and maintaining hundreds of community gardens in its locations across eight midwestern states. When customers purchase items that feature the One Step logo on it, such as russet potatoes and shredded wheat cereal, all profits go to funding community gardens; the program's purpose is to help supply fruits and vegetables to children in the community. The program has been in place for three years, and in 2016 the company funded 400 community gardens.

"In the community gardens, the dietitian goes out to educate children about maintenance and the importance of fruits and vegetables," says Julie McMillan, RD, LD. In her 12 years with Hy-Vee, McMillan has been promoted from in-store dietitian to assistant vice president of retail dietetics, overseeing more than 200 in-store dietitians. "The gardens are planted all over and anyone can apply for the funding from Hy-Vee. We've had daycares, YMCAs, and even local businesses that grow the produce and donate it to local food pantries."

Food City

Occasionally the community approaches the RD. This was the case for Food City Dietitian Elizabeth Hall, MS, RD, LDN, who says Healthy Kingsport in Kingsport, Tennessee, a local organization focused on improving the health of its residents through education and events featuring healthful foods and physical activity, reached out to her asking for more healthful catering options. Hall says the organization frequently uses Food City to cater its events, but the lack of healthful options on the chain's catering menu was an issue.

"The executive director for the organization came to me and asked if we could work together to develop healthier options in our catering menu, specifically more fruits and vegetables in the side dishes and desserts," Hall says.

Food City's catering menu only had vegetables in the form of casseroles, where cheese and butter overpowered the benefits of the vegetables, Hall says. To revise the menu, Hall met with Food City corporate chefs, culinary trainers, and catering managers to brainstorm ways to include more fruits and vegetables, such as adding vegetable medleys and fruit trays for dessert. With a revamped menu, Hall anticipates creating a designated healthful catering menu and incorporating the new dishes onto the hot bar.

Coborn's, Inc.

Emily Parent, RD, LD, encourages fruit and vegetable consumption through Coborn's Delivers program, a meal kit delivery service that caters to customers in the Minneapolis area. The meal kits are similar to those of Blue Apron and Hello Fresh in that all the ingredients for a meal are included and delivered to customers to assemble. When Parent started with Coborn's, the meal kit program already had existed, but she says she saw room for improvements.

"When I first started, they were simply putting a can of this or a bag of that in a box with a recipe card and selling it that way," Parent says. "Since lots of millennials use our service, I thought it made sense for me to come on board for the development of healthier recipes for meal kits."

Each season, Parent develops new recipes that emphasize fruits and vegetables. Over the course of two years, Parent says the company has sold more than 8,000 dietitian-approved meal kits. Equally important, Parent is having success with selling premade kid's lunches, which always promote fruits and vegetables. While the kid's lunch program is still in its early stages, the company has sold more than 1,000 lunches in two months.

"If someone is shopping online for groceries, they're most likely in a time crunch and want convenience," Parent says. "For that reason, I think school lunch kits are a great addition to our delivery program, especially for busy parents."

Social Media and Television

Weis Markets

Many retail dietitians are finding social media and television to be useful tools for reaching customers. Weis dietitians use Facebook Live as a modern approach to encourage shoppers to eat fruits and vegetables. Currently, a Facebook Live video by the Weis dietitians may receive upwards of 8,000 views with hundreds of comments and shares.

"We all know that many people will not buy a certain produce item if they are unsure how to cut or use it, and our videos usually include tips on how to select, cut, and use certain produce items," says Erin Dunleavy, MS, RDN, LDN, one of seven Weis dietitians covering 204 stores across seven states. "We believe our monthly videos are one of our most impactful efforts to encourage increased fruit and vegetable intake due to the increase in customer reach and positive engagement we get each month."

The messages the dietitians and marketing department develop coincide with the information published in circular ads and magazines. Dunleavy says they've had great success partnering with commodity boards for video sponsorships, and they usually include a mention of the product and a giveaway on Facebook Live to attract more customer interactions.

United Supermarkets

Jurek and her team of dietitians use the month of January to engage customers through e-mail with the campaign "The 28-day Challenge," featuring weekly challenges to encourage customers to adopt healthful habits throughout the entire month.

"This has been our answer to the New Year's resolution," Jurek says. "People always want to do big weight loss challenges, but we didn't feel comfortable promoting any sort of crash diets or crazy detox. Each week we focused on a different change you can make, such as adding a multivitamin or [eating] more fruits and vegetables."

Customers who sign up for the challenge are eligible to win prizes and gift cards. In 2017, Jurek says they had more than 2,000 customers sign up, more than 10,000 page views, and a 47% open rate, a measure of how many people clicked to open and read the e-mail.

Festival Foods

The retail dietitians of Festival Foods in Wisconsin understand the importance of branding across all media. The team of three, Jenni Dryer, RD, CD; Lauren Tulig, RDN, CD; and Emily Schwartz, MS, RDN, CD, is known as the Mealtime Mentors and spreads its nutrition messages on the company's blog, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, as well as on television.

The dietitians appear on local news segments at least three times per week and a statewide television show, **The Better Half**, where they discuss practical ways to incorporate healthful foods, particularly fruits and vegetables. After it airs, segments are posted on Festival Foods' YouTube channel, Facebook, and blog.

In addition, the dietitians create "hands and pans" videos for Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, which show an overhead view of them cooking. The **Mealtime Mentors** blog averages 50,000 views each month and features recipes with fruits and vegetables almost daily. The trio also dabbles in Facebook Live, and Dryer says they always make sure to post an announcement of upcoming Facebook Live videos beforehand on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

"We have more success with online promotions," Dryer says. "We've found that people don't want more paper; they just want to be able to access something online from their phone, computer, or tablet. That's why we share on so many platforms. I think our cross-posting is definitely a reason we're so successful."

Government Assistance

Kenny Family ShopRites of Delaware

In addition to using social media and television to boost produce consumption, some retail RDs are using government assistance programs.

Cassandra Umile, RD, LDN, had no experience with grant applications when her manager asked her to apply for the Food Insecurity and Nutrition Incentive grant, but she jumped at the opportunity. After a tedious process, Umile earned one of 32 grants from the USDA in the amount of \$45,000 to go towards increasing fruit and vegetable consumption for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) beneficiaries.

"During my research, I found that many programs that received the grant were farmers' markets," Umile says. "In the application, I tried to focus on the fact that we're open more often, we have more produce, we can reach more customers, and we still have a good relationship with the local farm bureau."

Umile says the Green Bucks program is only a couple of months old, but they're seeing positive reactions. The program allows SNAP beneficiaries in one store to receive a \$2 fresh fruit and vegetable voucher for every \$5 they spend on fruits and vegetables, with up to \$10 awarded each week. Vouchers are given as a printed coupon at checkout. Umile is already thinking ahead and recently submitted a grant application for \$500,000 to run the same program across six stores.

Northgate González Markets

Blanco partnered with the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), to receive the same Food Insecurity and Nutrition Incentive grant from the USDA in the amount of \$3.4 million. The program ran in two Northgate Market locations, and SNAP beneficiaries received a \$1 voucher to go towards the purchase of fruits or vegetables for every \$1 spent on a produce item (up to \$40 per month) in addition to having the option to attend nutrition education and cooking classes with UCSD.

"With the grant, the participant can only go to Northgate to buy the produce to get the \$1 matching," Blanco says. "It's a win-win for all parties, and it increases loyalty and produce sales. The customers are eating healthier and able to try produce that they might not have bought because now they have the extra money and the classes are giving them new ideas."

Making an Impact

When retail dietitians promote fruits and vegetables to their customers, they make a great impact on the communities they serve. Equally as important, they help improve the bottom line of grocery stores, where owners see a boost in sales of the products promoted and growing relationships between the store personnel and customers. In turn, retail dietitians prove their value and support the argument that they belong in supermarkets.

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

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