



Cooperative Grocer

Improving Your Deli's Hot Case

By Allen Seidner

What are customers looking for in a hot foods program, and what competitive advantages do you have in the world of meal solutions? Natural foods delis have a unique opportunity to provide hot foods of exceptional taste, freshness, value and convenience -- free of restaurant trappings such as dressing properly, waiting to be seated, perusing an extensive menu, waiting to order and for food to be cooked and served, and leaving a gratuity.

A hot case program also provides an opportunity to capitalize on shrink, just as deli managers use free shrink from the produce, meat and cheese departments -- saving store dollars already spent on cost of goods. But a hot case dominated by labor-intensive rescues of other departments' scraps, starchy comfort foods, deli leftovers, and bland tofu dishes will look more like a prison cafeteria than a proud showcase.

What should your menu strategy be? For starters, think beyond individual dishes. Think meals -- with coordinated side dishes plus a couple daily mainstays. Most of your side dishes should complement your entrees. Balance creativity with popular sellers; everyone likes some starchy comfort food now and then. If you're working with a limited labor production budget, focus a majority of creative energy on your entrees, and favor quick and simpler side dish recipes.

Next, aim to intensify support from your deli customers while attracting new sales from other segments of your store's market. Are your deli customers hungry for advancements in your cuisine? Might they salivate over hot cases with more ethnic flavors? Many natural foods delis could grow their sales by adding a small number of high-profile meat, poultry and fish dishes to their repertoire. You can seduce the carnivores, who are already in the store, into

trying your amazing vegan dishes by offering recipes incorporating the top-quality meat, poultry and seafood products sold elsewhere in the store.

If you have limited customer traffic or have yet to solidify a successful strategy, start with a simple menu plan. Whatever your strategy, create a menu template that sets a "flexible standard" for providing one dish in consistent categories, such as: vegetarian entree, meat, poultry or seafood entree, pizza, pasta, vegetable, bean, grain and potato. As your hot bar cooks advance along their learning curve, you'll be able to progressively broaden the selection of more creative, labor-intensive dishes. (A hot bar layout form you can use is at www.cgin.org/member/C329.asp)

Consider how adopting a more focused menu strategy will grow your program's sales, and design a production schedule that allows for labor to be 25 percent to 33 percent of hot case sales. If, for example, you can sell 55 pounds of hot case food a day at \$5.49 a pound, you'll generate sales of \$305. With an initial labor goal of 33 percent, you can afford a production budget of 10 hours at \$10 an hour.

In this example, you may choose to designate one person responsible for working a full morning shift to prep and produce an entire lunch hot bar, leaving additional prepped but uncooked batches for an evening cook to warm and complete for dinner. With a consistent menu template, a reasonably practiced cook can arrive as late as 7 a.m. and have four hours to prep and cook before unveiling an array of 6-9 dishes for lunch.

How do you avoid common pitfalls while growing into a signature program in your store and in your community? First off, honor and cheer improvements in creativity, consistency, productivity, and sales -- but don't get complacent. Listen to your customers, and be open to fresh ideas in food, theme and marketing, such as: "\$6 Sunday Dinner Deal," "Tuesday Thai Bar," or "Dessert Pizza Bar."

Build upon your successes by documenting and teaching other cooks winning recipes. Strive for consistency in taste and abundance in presentation during the extended mealtime periods. Don't be afraid to waste a few pounds of heat-beaten veggies or crusted rice that cost you minutes and a few dollars to produce in favor of replacing a dish with something fresh, or a clean empty pan. In time, your alluring hot entrees and steady side dishes will have customers phoning to ask about the day's menu. Promote your menu; publish a calendar of featured entrees customers can take to homes and offices. Publishing a menu also adds discipline to your orders and structure to your menu planning!

Bring professionalism to your hot case signage; give every item a laminated computer or neatly printed sign naming the item, its price, and a complete list of ingredients. Don't inconvenience customers by making them responsible for ingredient inquiries, or for matching up hot case items with a menu printed on

a marker board or paper menu; many of them won't. Have sample cups available, and educate staff on the value of proactively inviting customers to taste your foods. I saw a counter server sell 20 pounds of an expensive hot fish entrée in under an hour simply by inviting passersby to taste "one of my favorite dishes." Ask staff to try to gently build sales by using phrases resembling "What else may I get for you?" in place of "Is that all for you?"

Since it's easier to grow sales to your existing customers than it is to attract new customers, develop a system for selling hot food that makes it easy for customers to buy a collective meal rather than single dishes. For many staffed and all self-service hot bars this means selling all the selections at a set "mix and match" retail price, typically \$4.99 to \$5.99 per pound. The program typically achieves a variable margin around 65 percent by charging the same price for Cajun Chicken as it does for Bayou Beans & Rice. The greatest advantage to this pricing plan is that it allows the customer to focus on buying as many different items in the case as desired, without continually considering a variety of prices.

If you're running a service-staffed program with four or more wells of hot food, you can price with more traditional margins and offer variable prices for specific items. But endeavor to minimize the burdens that separate prices place on customers and staff, or you may undermine sales. Offer a "Meal Deal" with portion-minded servings of an entree and two sides for a fixed price, or consider allowing items costing similar amounts to be sold at consistent prices to minimize how frequently plates need to be tared, weighed and labeled.

Natural foods customers are rightfully demanding. If I've learned anything about running and counseling delis with hot foods, it is to maintain a balance between predictability and creativity, and to make it easy for customers to buy. Evolve your hot case into one that is talked about, a place where people know they can consistently find creative, delicious, healthy foods. After all, if you're not providing great foods with fewer hassles than most restaurants, why should your customers choose you?

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