



Cooperative Grocer

Making Grab and Go, Go!

By Allen Seidner

More and more stores are adding deli grab and go programs, hoping to grow sales and reduce service labor expenses. Stories abound of prepared foods departments doubling their sales.

On the other hand, many grab and go programs are floundering, failing to execute any number of retailing basics: product selection, consistency, availability, portioning, packaging, labeling and pricing. Here are tips for making the most of your grab and go case.

Are you offering meal solutions?

Meal solutions does not mean 2- and 3-item combination meals so much as it means offering a broad selection of items from which shoppers can build their own meal. There's almost nothing you can't do in a grab and go program: entrées, side dishes, crudités, sandwiches, burritos, wraps, quiches, dips, sauces, combo meals, green salads, juices and desserts.

The whole idea of grab and go is to meet the needs of customers who don't want to wait for service. If you're only offering side dishes, sandwiches, and leftover hot case entrees, you're missing a lot. Create signature meal choices, starting with great sandwiches and entrées, and see how well your side dishes take off. And if customers stay long enough to choose an entrée and a side dish, they'll also notice single-serving desserts.

Of course, the food not only needs to look good, it must taste good. Be sure your recipes are tweaked for maximum delight and shelf life. Every neighborhood is different, and your selections should reflect your shoppers' tastes and cultures. If you have a financially strapped vegan deli and half your

shoppers are buying meat, chicken and fish, consider adding prominently merchandised non-vegan entrées to attract those shoppers.

View your case as an organized presentation of a broad selection of items from your deli. Display shelf tags only with item names, and keep handy for staff a case layout with the names of items to be merchandised. (See sidebar: Plan-O-Gram.) You'll sell more side dishes if you maintain a supply of top-selling entrées and sandwiches. Expand your selection of dips and spreads, and you'll sell more crudités and platters.



Use the colors and shapes of food and its packaging in laying out an attractive, abundant looking case -- like this one at Bloomingfoods Cooperative & Deli.

Is merchandising catchy?

Are you selling food or empty shelving and the back of your case? Where possible use black, bracket-slanted shelves for the best look, and fit in a fifth or sixth shelf to eliminate views of the back of your case.

Just as abundance draws attention, scarcity repels it. If you're constantly falling short from a production and presentation standpoint, overhaul your systems so that holes in your case are eliminated. Don't be discouraged if great new products don't fly out of your case. Few shoppers will notice the great things you're doing until you're doing the entire case well -- consistently.

Restrict rotating items to defined product categories, such as quiche, soup or pizzas; don't rotate things that customers want regularly! Identify a set of consistently winning products and never run out of them. Remember, shoppers are viewing this case as they would a refrigerated grocery case, and they expect items that were available last week to be there today and next week. Satisfy the urge to make things more interesting by replacing slower sellers with new winning items and by making more sweeping seasonal menu changes.



At St. Peter Food Cooperative, deli manager Shyama O'Brien and staff label and stock their new grab and go case the night before its launching. A consistently strong self-service presentation has helped department sales surge nearly 50 percent since a remodel last fall.

Are pricing and portioning proper?

Because customers are more focused on the retail price of a particular package than they are on the price per pound, grab and go cases have an inherent advantage over full-service display cases in the opportunity to earn

healthy margins. Price to achieve your margin goal (63 to 70 percent is typical) and add 5 points to cover a desired budget of waste and sampling. Use variable margin pricing on great foods that fit a unique or important role. If you're not using variable margins to be competitive on commoditized products or to take a premium for more exclusive products, you're sacrificing sales in both categories. Shaving 10 margin points from your meat sandwiches and taking an extra 10 points on an amazing entrée or smoothie is a smart strategy.

If the shop down the street is selling inferior quality turkey and cheese sandwiches for \$3.99, market the quality of your ingredients fully and have an inexpensive turkey and cheese sandwich. But go beyond selling the commoditized sandwich by also offering a more creatively composed version -- perhaps with smoked gouda, avocado, and cranberry relish -- that sells for \$5.99. Grow your customer base and your sales by getting people hooked on your signature flavors!

Offer at least two sizes of your most popular selling items. Four-serving family packs of lasagna and 4-ounce sides of dips and spreads are easy ways to add sales. As a rule, aim for many small sales, but recognize conventional fair price points. Package entrees so retail servings land in the \$3.99-\$6.99 range; limit the retail price of an expensive sauce to \$3-\$5.

Are you packaging effectively?

Shoppers should see food -- then labels -- then, if at all, the case itself. Switch to containers that minimize inside air space and show off your food. Clear oblong containers are much more space-efficient and visually appealing than conventional opaque "deli rounds." Use props, especially on the bottom deck, to create more eye-appealing displays and draw the attention of customers. Use different shapes of entrée containers to break up the presentation.

To avoid displaying a sea of clear plastic, identify the foods that will visually or practically benefit from being in a specialized container. It's perfectly reasonable to stock a couple cases of packaging that you use only for a few products. Entrées and other items that people would only want to eat hot should be packaged in re-heatable containers.

Are products labeled properly?

Every product should have a name, preferably something recognizable or unique. "Joe's Chicken Burrito" tells a customer less than "Chipotle Chicken Burrito" does. "If you have sun-dried tomatoes in something and you don't have a decent name for it, you should probably put sun-dried tomatoes in the name," says John Webster, store manager at River Market Cooperative in Stillwater, Minnesota. "In the name, on the label, the key element that makes it special has to be brought out." Conversely, items that are labeled "Misc. Deli" forfeit an

opportunity to educate and build a wider following for your products. The label should also include any reheating instructions and have a "sell by" date; showing the "made on" date is superfluous and confusing.

If customers are to fully appreciate the quality of your ingredients, they have to know about them. List ingredients fully in the order of predominance. Listing "spices" or using obscure abbreviations won't answer shoppers' questions. Label ingredients "organic" if they always are, in accordance with the new USDA organics rule. Using "olive oil," in place of "organic extra virgin olive oil," does not make the most of your marketing opportunities. If the label information and a customer's taste buds can't justify the price of a product, it probably shouldn't succeed.

Don't let the label obscure a good picture of the food. "We're selling food, not labels," Webster reminds. Never put the label in the center of the package window -- you'll show a larger window of food if the label hugs an edge or wraps underneath the package.

Are you tracking production and learning from your analysis?

Develop a spreadsheet that subtracts waste from production to quickly determine sales and the percentage of waste for each product. For most deli items, waste of 5 percent is an achievable ideal. Adding in data for tracking product sales by item will give you insight into which items are financially carrying or hurting your grab and go program.

Tweak batch sizes to match the amount of each product you're capable of selling within its shelf life period, and learn to trigger production so that you always have a few units on the shelf when your new batch is stocked. If you're keeping your case consistently full with a broad selection of great tasting, appropriately packaged and labeled foods, your grab and go will really go!