



PERFECTING THE SUPERMARKET FOOD DEMO

A Practical Guide to Planning and Hosting In-Store Food Demonstrations

By Barbara Ruhs, MS, RDN, LDN

These days, more and more retail dietitians are hosting in-store food demonstrations, or demos, to introduce shoppers to new nutritious products and ingredients, provide nutrition education and expertise, and show them how to cook healthful meals using healthful ingredients. Food demos create in-store excitement, draw crowds eager to sample new foods, and, most importantly for the supermarket, have the potential to boost grocery sales.

During food demos, dietitians entice shoppers by preparing a variety of healthful foods or recipes and offering samples. "Food experiences are a very powerful way to get customers to try new things," says Julie McMillin, RD, LD, assistant vice president of retail dietetics at Hy-Vee, Inc, a supermarket chain based in Des Moines, Iowa, that employs nearly 230 in-store dietitians who host one to two food demos per week.

Dietitians who aren't working in the supermarket industry but would like to host in-store food demos can contact the corporate office of their local grocery store chain or a nearby store itself and present the idea to management, and include discussion on the fact that food demos offer benefits to customers and the stores themselves that host them.

In-store food demos not only encourage shoppers to sample new foods but also prompt them to buy the foods they've tasted, which increases store sales. According to an article published in the October 2014 issue of *The Atlantic*, called "The Psychology Behind Costco's Free Samples," food samples have increased sales as much as 2,000% for the chain in some cases.¹ Hosting food demos is a popular practice and as supermarkets become more of a place to socialize, the trend to offer food samples will continue

to grow.² *The Packer's* Fresh Trends 2013 annual survey reported that 49% of customers said they "could be enticed to buy a new item after trying it."

Of course, hosting successful food demos requires advanced planning on the part of RDs and other staff members. Meredith McGrath, RD, LDN, the corporate dietitian for Redner's Warehouse Markets, based in Reading, Pennsylvania, says that food and culinary demonstrations are a team effort, so there's much preparation and coordination that occurs behind the scenes. McGrath plans weekly food demonstrations that are hosted in the top 20 Redner's stores, but she relies on store personnel, whom she refers to as "ambassadors," to execute the demos because they're familiar with the stores and know their customer base.

The goal of Redner's food demo program, which she introduced three years ago, is to highlight meal solutions for families. Vendor sponsors make it possible to cover the costs of the program and contribute to the growth of the marketing platform. It's a win-win for everyone involved, McGrath says. "It generates more revenue for the retailer, grows sales for food industry partners, and provides customers with the convenience of finding all of the ingredients in one place to prepare a healthful, easy recipe at home," she says.

Hosting in-store food demos at a local supermarket also offers a great opportunity for dietitians to position themselves as the food and nutrition experts in their community. Whether dietitians are already employed by supermarket chains or are unaffiliated with the grocery industry, the following strategies can help them plan and host successful in-store food demos to promote healthful products, provide nutrition information, and increase store sales.

Learn Food Safety Guidelines

Before dietitians begin planning their first in-store food demo, they must educate themselves about food safety. Food safety is one of the primary concerns when planning a food demo, so RDs must learn their local and state food safety and sanitation guidelines. In most places, anyone serving food to the public is required to have some training or certification in food safety and food handling. Check with your local department of environmental health, where they will likely direct you to ServSafe, a nationally recognized food safety training program administered by the National Restaurant Association (www.servesafe.com).

To cover the basics, it's important that anyone serving or handling food is free from illness. Hair must be pulled back or confined in a hairnet, and hand washing with soap and water for 20 seconds before preparing and offering samples is imperative. Keeping a container of liquid hand sanitizer at your demo station is a good idea. All ingredients, utensils, and equipment should be thoroughly cleaned before and during the demonstration to avoid cross-contamination. Never leave your demonstration table unattended, and choose recipes that don't require you to keep hot or cold foods at specific

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temperatures to avoid spoilage or other food safety concerns. No-cook, easy-prep, simple-ingredient recipes are the easiest to work with to avoid food safety issues.

Begin Advanced Planning

During the planning stage, dietitians should prepare more information for the person performing the food demo than what they think they need, such as talking points, prices of ingredients, potential allergens, nutrition information, information on cooking techniques, and more, says Trish Farano, DTR, test kitchen manager/nutritionist for Dierbergs School of Cooking at Dierbergs Markets, Inc, based in Des Peres, Missouri. Farano says review the logistics of every food demo, addressing each step of the process. "Do they need a cutting board and a knife? Where in the store will they find disposable gloves? At the conclusion of the demo, where will they wash their hands, utensils, and other equipment?" Creating a checklist of ingredients, preparation steps, equipment needs, serving supplies, cleaning tools, and education materials required for a food demo can be useful to ensure nothing is forgotten. Dietitians should always display the recipe they're making, provide recipe cards for customers, and a shopping list for those who stop by for a sample. "Be prepared, have enough product to make a few batches of samples, and have products and ingredients on display along with your recipe," McMillin says.

Consider Logistics When Selecting Recipes

Some of the challenges facing dietitians who host food demos include not having easy access to electrical outlets, available refrigerator and freezer storage, demonstration tables, hand-washing areas, and garbage containers. It's best to choose easy-to-prepare, no-cook recipes requiring five or fewer ingredients. The more complicated a recipe, the more time RDs will need to prepare and the more likely they'll make mistakes. "Consider your audience," McMillin says. "Do they want to spend hours in the kitchen preparing recipes or are they looking for easy, affordable ideas that can be prepared once and enjoyed twice as leftovers?" In addition, RDs should make sure the store is well stocked with all of the ingredients and that shoppers can find them.

Estimate Number of Samples Needed

Calculating the number of samples needed in advance can be determined based on the budget or the duration of the demonstration. Joy Blakeslee, RD, director of the culinary studio for Publicis' MSL Group, a public relations agency based in Seattle, says that she calculates how many samples she will need based on how many samples she can comfortably hand out per minute, while also taking into account the amount of time it takes to share a few of her top talking points. "It's safe to plan one to two samples per minute or 60 to 120 samples per hour." Most food demonstrations are no longer than four hours, and it's typical to offer a smaller portion than an actual serving. For example, for liquid samples, it's practical to offer 1-oz servings. For other foods, it's reasonable to estimate that your sample size should be one-quarter of the serving size called for in the recipe.

Deliver Nutrition Messages

Hannaford Supermarkets, based in Scarborough, Maine, has stores throughout New England that feature weekly food demos in stores, at community events, and on local television. Marilyn Mills, MS, RD, LD, CDE, a dietitian for Hannaford located in Manchester, New Hampshire, says that familiarity with ingredients is critical. The dietitians at Hannaford use carefully selected products from sponsors in their recipes and use demonstrations to communicate science-based information about healthful eating. Mills says she does plenty of research in advance so she can select tips, historical facts, and fun nutrition trivia to entice customers with samples.

"The more fun or enjoyment customers can have with food preparation, the more likely they will go home and prepare it themselves," Mills says, adding that she's had several customers come back to the store and recount their experiences making some of her recipes. Recently, Mills hosted a demo that featured lemon zest and was delighted to see customers purchasing the kitchen gadget to make the zest for the recipe.

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Food demos offer dietitians unique opportunities for teachable moments that make nutrition come alive through the senses, Mills says. Reinforcing the benefits of eating more fruits and vegetables, and lowering sodium and added sugar in the diet are a few of the messages that can be effectively communicated during a food demo.

Blakeslee says she likes to help shoppers develop more confidence in the kitchen during her food demos. Being located in the Pacific Northwest, she often touts the benefits of seafood and demonstrates how delicious and easy it is to cook frozen fish. It's an affordable and quick meal solution for protein-hungry shoppers that usually pay double for prepared foods with far fewer nutritional benefits, she says.

Measure Results

Farano says that on the days she hosts food demos, she can calculate how much product sales have increased. McMillin does the same. In fact, both Farano and McMillin provide sales projections to in-store dietitians for demos and regularly track the impact of the interactions between dietitians and shoppers.

A 2013 study performed by the Cornell Food and Brand Lab, published in *Advances in Consumer Research* showed that shoppers given a healthy (apple) vs unhealthy (cookie) food sample during shopping could influence subsequent choices in their shopping baskets in a positive way. For example, those shoppers given an apple vs a cookie spent more money on fruits and vegetables compared with the cookie eaters. Food sampling can be as simple as offering a customer a slice of fruit, although a food demo usually involves more preparation. In either case, offering a taste or sample of food during a shopping trip is a strategy that many supermarkets can use to enhance the shopping experience as well as the bottom line.³

Proof Is in the Pudding

In-store food demos offer dietitians an opportunity to work with a prop they know best—food. Food safety, logistics, and planning are some of the key pieces to hosting successful food demos in stores that lead to increased sales and healthier shopping behavior.

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For references, view this article on our website at www.TodaysDietitian.com.