



Getting A Bigger Piece of the Foodservice Pie

Quality, price point and flexibility continue to drive customer interest in pizza.

By Howard Riell, Associate Editor.

Americans are into upscale, premium and gourmet everything these days. So why would anyone expect pizza to be any different? The question is, “Can your pizza program measure up?”

From exotic toppings to a variety of doughs, c-store operators are upscaling their pizza offerings in order to compete with everyone else that’s selling pizza—a daunting challenge, but one that can be won.

“I think the reason consumers are looking for all these enhancements is that we’re getting used to so much flexibility in what we’re being offered that we just want more,” said Darren Tristano, executive vice president for Chicago-based Technomic Inc. “They’re going to get gas, pick up a two-liter soda, grab a pizza and run home. So again, just because of the name—convenience store—they’re looking for added convenience for specific occasions.”



Pizza is a big item at Manley’s Mighty Marts in Binghamton, N.Y. “It’s there, it’s ready and it delivers value and quality” said Brandi Becker, the chain’s foodservice director. Nineteen of Manley’s 23 locations make their own fresh pizza dough and sauce on site.

Veteran foodservice consultant Arlene Spiegel, of Arlene Spiegel & Associates in New York City, pointed out that while branded pizza concepts like Little Caesar, Dominos and Pizza Hut have been established as co-branding options for convenience stores, the change to a gourmet offering is merely a trading-up of a popular menu item. “As store brands upgrade, they want to upgrade their food menus to enhance their overall image and appeal,” she said. “I’m not surprised to see burgers, sandwiches and branded delis go the same route.”

Variety is Key

Manley’s offers a wide array of specialty pizzas that, according to Becker, “you wouldn’t see at most other locations. We’ve been pushing them a lot lately.”

Premium Products

There has never been a shortage of consumers wanting premium products. “In fact, we like to think our society would pay more for healthier product, but we really want better tasting,” said Tristano, of Technomic. “Since premium generally means it’s better quality, they’re willing to pay a little bit more. For the most part, they don’t care where that quality comes from—the convenience store, a deli, restaurant, etc.” Between consumers and competitors, Tristano added, “c-store operators cannot afford to lose focus.”

Why People Choose Pizza

Why do consumers choose pizza over other meal options? According to research by Chicago-based consultancy Technomic, it’s taste, ease and value—important information for any operator contemplating or already offering a gourmet pizza program.

Among the things consumers told Technomic about their pizza strategies:

- Approximately 93% of consumers said they eat pizza at least once a month. The average consumer eats pizza nearly three times per month.
- Nearly one-fifth of consumers (17%) said that new items influence where they buy pizza. That sentiment is strongest among those aged 18-24 years (22%).
- About 41% of those questioned said they would like pizza establishments to offer healthier ingredients, such as whole wheat crusts (42%), organic toppings and crusts (30% and 28%, respectively), and all-natural and locally-sourced ingredients (50% and 38%).

“Operators and suppliers will want to consider what they can do to elicit consumer cravings through adding new items to their menus and emphasizing them through their marketing message,” said Darren Tristano, Technomic’s executive vice president. “Differentiation through pizzas that feature unique flavors and taste combinations that consumers cannot purchase elsewhere or make at home will likely help support this effort. Positioning pizza as a meal solution that is easy, convenient and affordable will resonate with many consumers.”