



CONVENIENCE STORES EMBRACE FOODSERVICE

Where many restaurants have struggled to stave off disaster in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, convenience stores are juggling new foodservice opportunities

By Howard Riell

Convenience stores – c-stores – with foodservice programs have a chance to benefit from the blows dealt to their restaurant competitors, but they need to adjust their approach to align with new realities.

“The hardest change any operator has to make is to change the mindset of ‘business as unusual,’” says Arlene Spiegel FCSI, president of Arlene Spiegel & Associates in New York City. “Everything that was part of ‘normal’ operations has to be looked at and modified through the lens of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and state regulation guidelines. That includes all of the basics – purchasing, receiving, storing, preparing, merchandising and selling products. It includes safety and sanitation of equipment, staff and contactless packaging.”

C-stores, Spiegel notes, have a particular challenge in that their premises are often small and lack the necessary space to allow for adequate safe distancing of staff or customers. “Many have been able to create a safe line-up outside their venues, including in parking lots,” she says.

Technology has made business possible through the use of QR codes, mobile ordering, third-party

delivery apps and safe curbside pick-up. “Those operators who adapted actually thrived in this environment, especially the drive-thru c-stores. The ‘new normal’ for operators that embrace and master the new challenges can lead to a new prosperity model,” Spiegel adds.

Changing operations

While c-stores always adapt to local market areas, there are strategies common to all locations that can advance foodservice programs, to name a few: expanded transactions, cooking and food prep, sanitation, air, contact, curbside service, delivery, apps, barriers, employee training, and signage.

In this way, another opportunity for c-store operators to take advantage of is the increased demand for good quality prepared foods and meal solutions, says Spiegel. “Operators have expanded their current offerings and/or have partnered with restaurants and caterers to provide packaged meals to sell at their stores.” Equipment and supply companies have helped by supplying wayfinding signage and contactless serving equipment for hot and cold beverages, as well as PPE supplies and sanitation dispensers.