

Bread WITH Less Bread

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Unless you have been hibernating for the past six months, you can guess that the number one thought on most people's minds is the economy. The global downturn has impacted households from New York to Shanghai – from London to San Paulo. Given these new macro-economic realities, how have consumers altered their view of one of our most basic needs – food? To look at restaurants and supermarkets in major cities, it is hard to see evidence of a downturn. But food manufacturers and restaurant companies are girding themselves for a tough 2009. While not surprisingly, major fast food chains have held up well. McDonald's could turn a profit in F'08. All elements of the food chain remain under severe pressure, however, as the global recession deepens.

Trade-off to Value

While every consumer is different, in tough economic conditions people shift from expanding their horizons to protecting their happiness. It means a prioritizing process that reassesses perceived wants and needs as individuals create a new and unique “recipe for happiness.” Trend watchers such as Iconoculture suggest the recipe is different for everyone. Yet few people abandon the things that they view as core to who they are. They won't necessarily stop eating out on Friday night, but their choice of restaurant might change. They won't stop grilling on the weekends, but their definition of a great BBQ might include new choices. In recessionary times, purveyors of food need to deeply understand their consumer's revised set of values and how they want to be communicated to instruct efficient, effective brand communications.

Hearts vs. Heads

As money becomes a larger issue, understanding the consumer psychology of food becomes paramount. Cohn & Wolfe has examined the psychology of two distinct types of food consumers: those who follow their hearts, and those who follow their heads. When stressed financially, the heart or (mainstream) shopper will tend toward food choices – in and out of the home – that place the emphasis on the social aspects of eating – family eating experiences, gatherings of friends – where food serves as the hub of social interaction. In addition, as they focus on the financial implications of providing for the family, food traditions that provide comfort rise to the fore. The notion of “comfort food” might seem like a cliché, but in these times, the heart consumer will look to the past for positive experiences that provide warmth and reward. These consumers also find comfort in food brands that have endured time and have demonstrated stability through the years.

If your brand's consumer tends toward the heart, there are key communications strategies that will help focus your marketing efforts. Not surprisingly, borrowing equity from your product's connection to widely held traditions is effective in these times. Make sure to place your offering at the center of classic menus, reminding people of great past experiences

can prompt new ones. Tell preparation stories, with your brand at its core, that involve the entire family. And suggest new traditions that meet the need to make food a family or social event. In a recession, pot luck dinners are cool! Heritage recipes that feature whole foods replacing convenience ingredients become a reflection of better days. Some trend watchers see slow cookers making resurgence as they embody effortless yet good cooking.

For many food brands, the core consumer reacts to financial stress by putting their thinking caps on. These “head” or (progressive) shoppers take a progressive approach to food and restaurant choices by seeking new knowledge and insight to make smarter food choices. Happiness for this food consumer is obtained by finding ways to make trade-offs that don’t sacrifice quality or great experiences. In addition, they want to continue to express themselves through the restaurants they frequent and meals they prepare; they revel in the challenge of inventing new rituals and trying new flavors.

ABOUT Cohn & Wolfe Consumer Marketing

Our goal is to connect with consumers – not just through the media, but through a variety of channels designed to educate, inform and influence purchase decisions. From presenting the differentiating attributes of a new product to shedding light on a new use for an old one, we know how to motivate action among the most hard to reach segments of the consumer audience.

Many of the world's great brands such as Nike, Hilton, Panasonic and Colgate trust Cohn & Wolfe to tackle their toughest marketing challenges.

We have won that trust by being brand marketers whose tool happens to be public relations.

Speaking to the “head” food consumer starts with clearly articulating your offerings unique value proposition – in some cases repositioning it as a high-value replacement for an established trend. Brands that appeal to this consumer have to feel new or renewed. Communicating new ways to use the products that put this consumer at the cutting-edge is critical. Consumers feel a great deal of satisfaction when they are able to figure out how to get good quality food and enjoy great meal experiences. Self-sufficiency and accomplishment in this area feels like a merit badge.

- Shifting out-of-home dining experiences from dinner to lunch allows the consumer to eat at “in” restaurants, enjoy innovative foods and a much-reduced price.
- Alternatively, consumers who like the night life can order an array of appetizers and share with their friends – allowing them to sample different menu items without incurring the cost of pricier entrées.
- Slow cookers have enjoyed a renewed popularity and allow home cooks the option of buying more affordable cuts of meat to make tasty main courses family and friends love — and require little or no effort to prepare.

Regardless of the consumer, recessionary realities increase peoples focus on the choices they are making. It’s at these moments of truth where food and restaurant brands risk getting cast in the prohibition list — things we did once but seem out of step with a tighter economic environment. To avoid prohibition, brands need to ramp-up the education that makes the case for your brand over all others.

Food as Entertainment

Selling a food experience is a must do when non-staple food options or restaurants begin competing with other forms of entertainment (movies, shopping etc.) for a shrinking pool of discretionary funds. Tell a balanced story that emphasizes an enjoyable

atmosphere or entertainment options with a value for money food message. In addition, create the sense that a food experience promises an emotional reward that makes eating out a night out to remember. Themes such as taking time out for family fun or finding an oasis from the rat race become part of your brand story. Menu options or changes in décor simply support these emotional themes touching consumers in the heart and the stomach.

Think Like a Chef

Great chefs are one part artist, one part manager and often one part teacher. Each of these attributes can serve as a useful platform when telling a recession food story. While using chefs as spokespeople is not breakthrough, thinking of them as great food managers might help tell your products story. As business people, successful chefs employ techniques for getting the most out of food that are directly transferable to home cooking. This includes everything from:

- Sourcing seasonal ingredients that are grown locally and deliver on both taste and price.
- No waste mentality – everything gets used in a chef’s kitchen, bones and vegetable trimmings are used to make stock; tonight’s dinner is reinvented for tomorrow’s lunch or dinner special.
- Teaching knife skills is one example of a how-to that can help consumers save money by allowing them to buy larger cuts of meat and doing the butchering themselves.
- Storage strategies also can help people plan better and limit waste.

In the end, tough economic times create the need for marketers of food to rethink and hone their brand stories. By finding your unique consumers recipe for happiness, companies will help create their brands recipe for success.

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