

# 10 Ways To Score An A-Plus In Sales At Back-To-School Time



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# Soups Equal Opportunity

An increasing number of supermarket delis are discovering that there are growing opportunities for well-operated fall soup programs

BY LISA WHITE

Supermarkets that have tried and been unsuccessful with soup programs in the past should reconsider instituting a program in the deli department. This is because, in the last three decades, consumer preferences and eating patterns have changed almost as much as retail soup programs.

"Today's consumers want fresh ingredients, like herbs, spices and vegetables that can be tasted and uniquely identified in each spoonful of soup," says Lynnea Jodway, marketing coordinator at Sandridge Food Corp., based in Medina, OH. "It's all about the experience of enjoying a savory meal."

Today, with the growing number of options, these products are profitable additions to deli department prepared food programs.

"Fresh cup soup sales in the deli are up about 18 percent," says Robert Sewall, executive vice president of sales and marketing for Blount Fine Foods, based in Fall River, MA. "Soup is definitely something retailers can invest space in because they will see a decent return in sales. Soup is on 62 percent more menus in casual dining restaurants and 52 percent more menus for white table cloth restaurants. The category is growing in the foodservice and retail sectors."

## Flavor Trends

Innovations in varieties and flavors have helped propel the soup category to new heights.

"We're seeing an increase in global flavors, which includes regional international styles," says Levon Kurkjian, vice president of marketing at Kettle Cuisine, located in Chelsea, MA. "This is something that has been happening for a couple of years now, but is gaining momentum each year and has broader acceptance."

The most successful retailers are integrating flavors and ingredients from different cultures into soups with a more familiar



format.

"In fresh soups, taste and flavor are critically important," Kurkjian says. "In the early days of this category, freshness was the number one factor, but now health and wellness are equally important as well as taste."

Even with the continued flavor innovation, the tried and true staples still sell best. These include chicken noodle, tomato and broccoli cheddar.

"For fall, the focus is more on rotating different varieties based on the season to create increased interest in the category," Kurkjian says. "Alternatives typically include butternut squash or pumpkin bisque, which help draw consumers to the category that may not typically purchase soup."

Just like soup preferences vary depending on the region, demographics also play a part in which flavors sell best.

What is now universal is that Americans are seeking foods with healthier ingredient profiles, reduced sodium and less calories.

"No matter what the age, people are looking to eat healthier, given the opportunity," Sewall says. "Still, there is a movement toward more robust soup flavors."

In the past, consumers would sacrifice taste for soup that was more nutritious, organic and all natural, but now this category offers satisfying flavors with healthier ingredient profiles.

"As deli buyers are considering menu options, they should rely on manufacturer partners to supply flavor information," says Jamie Collins, director of marketing for St. Louis, MO-based Kent Precision Foods. "Many times, manufacturers are members of other research organizations and can be a valuable resource for popular flavors."

Becoming a destination in this category depends on thinking outside the box, but in a way that won't lead to an increase in shrink or loss of dollars.

"We like building cup programs off of bulk or foodservice programs, because it's easier

to sample unique soups this way,” says Bobby Ray, vice president of retail at Haliburton International Foods, based in Ontario, CA. Its retail division is Select Store brands. “It’s best to offer different soups each day, changing flavors often or offering a soup of the day to make the deli destination. This way, if a flavor fails, the retailer can quickly move on to another item and that flavor can be taken out of the rotation.”

Because soup popularity is regional, a popular soup variety down south may not work out east.

“Selection is important to drive soup sales,” Ray says.

Limited time offers are another option retailers can take advantage of to ramp up soup programs.

This fall, Sandridge is offering two limited time only items. Turkey-Kale soup has chunks of turkey, fresh-chopped kale, diced onions, northern beans and wild rice in an herb broth. Mushroom Orzo soup includes diced mushrooms, orzo, onions and parsley simmered in a creamy broth with notes of brandy.

“Many limited time offers will feature seasonal ingredients. This lends to the authenticity and freshness of the products,” Jodway says. “It is always good to introduce soups people can connect with as well as soups that remind them of the season.”

### Building a Program

When building a fall soup program, retailers should strive to create a destination for soup.

“Most people believe that they have to dedicate a ton of space to it, [but that’s not the case],” Kurkjian says. “It is important to make it abundantly clear to shoppers that you understand soup and are committed to it. This can be accomplished with as few as four hot wells and four facings of refrigerated soup or as many as eight hot wells and 30 facings.”

It’s the soup programs that are well-managed that will make an impression. This includes pairings, combos and cross merchandising with bakery items.

“On the refrigeration side, it’s important to have a constant rotation to keep consumers engaged and loyal to the category,” Kurkjian says.

It’s important soups are served at the proper temperature for food safety as well as flavor, with the right consistency and seasoning.

The variety should include options for vegetarians, vegans and choices for those with other dietary restrictions.

“When building a soup category, retailers should include a breadth of everything—a



well thought-out mixture of broth-based soups, cream soups, bisques and chowders,” Jodway says.

Retailers can further set themselves apart by creating an easy-to-find section for fall soups and running promotions to draw attention to these products.

Those without a clean and dynamic hot to-go section are not showing the dedication this category deserves.

“It’s important to offer hot to-go and refrigerated packaged soup,” Sewall says. “If the soup tureens are not full, that’s a bad sign. If there are only two soups offered, it doesn’t show a commitment to the category.”

The good news is that soup does not require a big labor commitment. These items are put out at the start of the day and replenished as needed. The soup area only needs basic upkeep throughout the day like the salad bar and other self-service deli areas.

“If a deli department wants to compete with restaurants, they have to act like them,” Sewall says. “This includes staying fully stocked and providing an appealing selection and eye-catching display.”

The recommended number of soups varies, depending on the store’s location. Ideally, retailers should offer at least three to four hot soups to-go and eight to 12 in cups.

Sewall says the number one-selling size is a 24-ounce soup, while the 16-ounce is the second most popular. Those offering a soup and sandwich and/or salad program will want to include single-serving sizes in the lineup.

“When considering how many sizes to offer, retailers have to evaluate where they are in the soup world,” Sewall says. “One size does not fit all.”

Fresh soup programs, in particular, should

mimic the can varieties in the grocery aisle, but offer more.

“Varieties like chicken noodle can include a clean chicken broth base, white meat and vegetables, along with other ingredients that aren’t available from brands in the grocery aisle,” Sewall says. “Clam chowder and lobster bisque made with real cream and fresh seafood is decadent, yet can offer a price that is competitive with casual and fine dining restaurants, since delis are competing with these outlets.”

It’s important for retailers to gear soup programs to the store’s demographic. For example, younger consumers will be looking for more variety, so catering to them by providing different options will be critical.

Looking inside the store for ingredient ideas can help leverage costs, while helping to build profits.

“We offer a solid soup base and encourage delis to look at what’s popular in the produce section and in the perimeter of the store for ingredient ideas,” Collins says. “Incorporating a popular vegetable before it goes bad and repurposing this into a soup helps decrease overall waste and extends shelf life.”

Depending on the store and management structure, delis can partner with the produce and/or meat department to help create an effective and unique soup program.

“Stores definitely can see what their customers are attracted to and turn around and build a cup program dependent on this,” Ray says. “Soup manufacturers that utilize fresh ingredients and either refrigerate or freeze the product right away will have a fresher result than what store operators can make themselves.”

### Carving Out Space

A successful soup program also is highly dependent on its location and how it is merchandised.

Most manufacturers recommend dedicating an end cap to these products, which provides added visibility and further shows the retailer’s commitment to this program.

“The programs that are really successful have dedicated kiosks, which are on the end of a salad bar or hot food bar,” Kurkjian says. “What doesn’t work well is when soup is dispensed behind the counter. Self-service programs are preferable than full-service, and stand-alone kiosks separate retailers from the pack.”

Creative cross merchandising and promotions are necessary to draw more shoppers to the prepared foods area.

With more people eating at home to save money, soup is an important option to offer as part of a sandwich and salad program. **DB**