

Premier Foodservice

CASE STUDY



Ahead of the curve: Leading the way toward healthier alternatives

Premier Foodservice members have always counted on the Premier portfolio for the highest quality products at the lowest price. But when it comes to foodservice purchases, there's a growing acknowledgement that food choices have a significant impact – both nutritionally and environmentally.

Clearly, hospitals have a vested interest in offering food choices that are healthier for patients and our environment. Evidence has shown that the food we eat can dramatically affect health and a poor diet can contribute to conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and even some cancers. And related issues such as how food is harvested, packaged, shipped and disposed of can have profound consequences on the environment.

But with limited resources, how can institutional foodservice directors seek out healthier alternatives while still balancing the budget?

Given that most foodservice operators face daunting fiscal expectations, looking for ways to balance the bottom line with access to healthier choice items is challenging.

A GROWING TREND

Hospitals have always prepared patient meals that are modified for health conditions and are lower in fat and sodium. Building on this concept, hospital cafeterias are taking food preparation to the next level by offering these items as well as those with zero grams of trans fat or purchasing items that are environmentally friendly. This is especially true at colleges and university foodservice departments.

This trend is expected to explode over the next few years. Those trailblazers who are leading the way often find the task time consuming and cumbersome. But with growing demand, that's about to change.

Premier Foodservice members spend about \$2 billion annually. According to a U.S. Foodservice survey of Premier members, about 12 percent of hospitals and 31 percent of colleges and universities currently purchase certified organic products. When it comes to natural food, the numbers are slightly higher – about 22 percent of hospitals and 54 percent of colleges and universities.

When asked about their willingness to consider purchasing these items, even if it meant higher prices of up to 10 percent, 20 percent of hospital members and 38 percent of college and university members indicated that they would “probably” or “definitely” purchase healthier alternatives. Another 36 percent of hospital members and 39 percent of college and university members “might” consider purchasing them.

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WHAT DO “HEALTHY ALTERNATIVES” REALLY MEAN?

Given the range of interconnected issues related to “healthy alternatives,” there is a wide variety of sometimes confusing terminology. Healthy alternatives can encompass terms such as organic, natural, or zero grams trans fat, as well as related terms such as sustainable, free-range, fair trade, and RBGH, antibiotic and pesticide-free.

While each of these is important, current attention has been focused on two areas that have generated the greatest interest: organic (also known as green) and zero trans fats.

CURRENT PREMIER EFFORTS: ORGANIC/GREEN

Although there is national certification necessary to use the organic seal, there can be many variations in the use of the word “organic” on a food label. Equally confusing is the term “green,” as it can carry numerous meanings.

In 2006, Premier’s Foodservice Committee, made up of member foodservice directors who guide Premier’s contracting decisions, created a subcommittee to examine the green and organic alternatives trends. With the committee’s recommendation, the Premier distribution agreement with U.S. Foodservice now includes access to pre-cut organic produce. The portfolio also offers sustainable products – meaning that items are farm-raised, and are therefore a replenishable resource. As a result of the

subcommittee’s work, Premier is making a conscious effort to offer more green products.

Premier has collected a list of items that contracted manufacturers have identified as green, sustainable, or organic, and it is available on the Premier Foodservice Web site, along with the manufacturers’ definitions.

CURRENT PREMIER EFFORTS: ZERO TRANS FAT

As a result of recent publicity, consumers have become more educated on the health risks of consuming trans fat and are demanding alternatives to products that contain it. Trans fat has been shown as a factor that can increase cholesterol, a heart disease risk factor.

The Premier Foodservice Committee has discussed the trans fat issue and agreed that manufacturer requests for proposals will now require information about the availability of zero trans fat offerings and that this information will be considered when making all future contract awards.

As an interim measure, Premier has collected lists from the manufacturers identifying current products on contract with zero trans fat. This list, available on the Premier Foodservice Web site, offers great choices for zero trans fat margarines, such as Promise trans fat free, Smart Balance, and Optimax, a cooking oil that not only is trans fat free but also remains stable for longer periods.

Noticeably, manufacturers are offering more zero trans fat products, and it appears these products will become even more plentiful in the near future. Premier will continue to advocate on behalf of our members for more zero trans fat products. As manufacturers continue to address this issue, access to these products will become easier, perhaps universal.

A MEMBER’S PERSPECTIVE

Premier shareholder Texas Health Resources (THR) focuses on the trans fat free issue. Neal Lavender, director of food, nutrition, and conference services at Presbyterian Hospital in Dallas, said, “Texas is the proud state known for chicken fried steak as well as great Southwestern cuisine! As a large health system, we knew this was not going to be an easy task. Nevertheless, this was the right thing to do in supporting the communities we serve and setting the standard with our own employees.

“Our goal is to be at least 90 percent trans fat free in all of our retail areas by the fourth quarter of this year. In April, every THR foodservice director focused attention on the cafeteria grill venue because they are known for fried foods, quick-serve items, and high volumes throughout the day. We rolled out a trans fat free plan that included items such as french fries, onion rings, chicken strips, and fried vegetables – some of our biggest sellers! We had been using trans fat free oils so that made this initiative even easier.



“One of the biggest challenges that we had was not with our clientele. Our customers like the idea. Finding good tasting trans fat free items comparable to what we had before is the challenge. Some manufacturers will tell you they are still working on it, while others have embraced the idea. Tyson and Advance Foods have done a terrific job and offer lots of tasty trans fat free items to choose from.

“We also have had good support from U.S. Foodservice. They have assisted us in sourcing and providing trans fat free items. They, too, have a strong interest in this change and have been supportive of our needs. I am pleased to say that I believe we are very close to accomplishing our goal as a health system. We knew that if we were going to continue to be

the health system of choice for the Dallas-Fort Worth areas, we just had to do this!”

Premier is guiding the way for our members and will continue to provide leadership and support to help them make the healthiest choices for patients, customers and their communities.

For more information about Premier's Foodservice program, contact Premier's Solution Center at 877.777.1552 or visit the Foodservice Web site at www.premierinc.com/foodandnutrition.

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— Neal Lavender, director of food, nutrition, and conference services, Presbyterian Hospital



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For more information

Please contact your Premier Region Director, our Solution Center at 877.777.1552, SolutionCenter@premierinc.com, or www.premierinc.com.