

Coronavirus triggers consumers' "guilty pleasures"

KANSAS CITY, Mo. – Monday, March 15, 2020 – Isolation and social distancing brought on by COVID-19, or coronavirus, are causing unprecedented changes in consumer behavior, according to The Center for Food Integrity [Consumer Trust Insights Council](#) (CTIC), which brings together food industry thought leaders and social scientists to explore emerging trends. How the food system adapts to these changes is critical.

“Buying patterns have shifted dramatically as people stock up on supplies,” said Carl Perrson, senior director of global cross-category consumer insights at PepsiCo. In addition to hand sanitizers and toilet paper, shoppers are passing over fresh items to fill their carts with canned and frozen foods.

“It really is a reversal of everything we learned about shopper trends over the past decade or so,” he said. “I imagine there’ll be a great awareness of the notion of preparation and of keeping a supply.”

But, according to CTIC, there’s something else folks are buying during their supply runs – guilty pleasures.

While, on one hand, consumers are buying healthy food as a preventative measure, sales of treats like chocolate, cookies and beverages are ticking up. If social distancing measures continue for long, the council predicts people increasingly will seek out little indulgences to bring them joy during anxious times.

CFI’s Consumer Trust Insights Council has been meeting once a month since December for roundtable discussions. Their analysis highlights early signals of emerging trends that food companies can use to make strategic decisions.

During the March roundtable, members said that the coronavirus pandemic is also accelerating a “homing” trend that has been building over the last few years.

“The world is a bit of a scary place. The home has been a very comforting spot where we can get all of our entertainment and we can get just about anything delivered to us,” said Susan Schwallie, executive director of the NPD Group Food and Beverage practice. “Your home is your sanctuary.”

Several factors are driving this at-home economy, Schwallie said. Millennials see food as a social occasion and like to gather in their homes to share food with friends. Meal delivery services make it possible to eat restaurant food at home. Streaming video and home delivery services mean people don’t have to go out to be entertained.

“That notion of cocooning and the search for safety, that’s been a long-term trend and the more chaotic the world gets, people search for these notions of what they know and trust,” added Perrson. “My hunch will be that this [coronavirus outbreak] just reinforces that.”

Companies are fast-tracking technologies for direct-to-consumer sales and personalization of food products. Restaurants and retailers are also looking to China for automation processes that reduce human contact.

The council also discussed the importance of transparency for the food system in order to build trust in the food supply when consumers are concerned about health and safety.

“While we’re in uncharted territory, tried and true communications fundamentals still work. Without communication, people fear the worst. It’s important for the food and agriculture industries to help put their stakeholders’ minds at ease,” said Terry Fleck, CEO of The Center for Food Integrity.

As the situation around the world changes rapidly, so does the potential impact on the food system.

“It’s going to take us a little bit to see how this evolves and whether this does lead to fundamental changes in culture,” said Ujwal Arkulgud, founder of MotivBase and a member of CTIC and the CFI Board of Directors. “We know things are going to get worse. We just don’t know the degree to which that will happen. Culturally and in terms of the impact on businesses, it’s a wait and watch game.”

To learn more about CFI’s Consumer Trust Insights Council, log on to www.foodintegrity.org.

