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## QSRs strive to serve more healthful fare despite Wendy's woes

By Amy Garber

Wendy's recently pulled from its menu a fresh fruit bowl, but fast feeders are saying they remain committed to offering more nutritious options despite the challenges of selling perishable produce.

And fast-food customers are claiming that's what they want. A recent survey found not only that customers would like fast feeders to offer more healthful menu items, but that the availability of products like salads could help drive business.

"Because most QSR chains offer only a few healthful items, there is a fair amount of untapped potential to generate increased visitation and trial, even among young males, by offering more of these types of items," said Bob Sandelman, president of Sandelman & Associates, a San Clemente, Calif.-based foodservice market research firm.

However, the results of the Sandelman survey contradicted what Wendy's said it experienced. Officials for the Dublin, Ohio-based chain said lack of consumer interest was one of the main reasons why they took the mixed fruit medley off the menu last month.

The offering included an entrée-sized fruit bowl, priced around \$4.19, and a smaller cup, priced around \$2.19. The bowl and cup, which were launched nationwide in February with strong marketing support, featured seedless grapes, pineapple, cantaloupe and honeydew. The bowl also came with low-fat strawberry yogurt.

Although the nation's third-largest burger chain, which has more than 6,000 units, reported selling 1 million pounds a week of fruit one month after the introduction, sales had lagged in recent months. The fruit offerings "tended to be more of a seasonal product and customers had not responded as we had hoped," Wendy's spokesman Bob Bertini said. "It doesn't mean that we won't have them on the menu at some point in the future."

He pointed out that Wendy's continues to sell mandarin orange slices for 99 cents and allows customers to substitute at no additional charge either a baked potato, small chili or one of two side salads for fries when ordering a combo meal. The so-called "Combo

Choices" program was introduced about a year ago.

The Wendy's fruit bowl may have been priced too high for customers, observers said.

Entrée salads have been more successful than fruit for quick-service chains because customers use them as meals, Sandelman theorized. "Fruit seems to be more like a side item," he said, pointing out that for nearly the same price as the large fruit bowl at Wendy's, patrons could get an entrée salad, which might have created some price resistance to the fruit.

Sandelman said he was "a little surprised" Wendy's pulled the fruit bowl because it helped prevent "the veto vote" and deflected, at least in part, some of the negative publicity quick-service chains have received in recent years about the lack of nutritious options.

According to the study Sandelman conducted called "Consumer Attitudes Toward Health and Nutrition at Fast-Food Restaurants," nearly one-third of all quick-service restaurant users remain "very concerned" about the nutritional content of fast food. More than one in three QSR users



McDonald's offers a Fruit and Walnut Salad, above, in an effort to sell more healthful menu items consumers say they want.

say they would visit one of their regular chains more often if it offered a greater number of healthful foods, and 68 percent say they would visit a chain they don't typically patronize if it offered a greater selection of healthful items. The research was conducted from July to September among a sample of 600 fast-food users.

Harry Balzer, vice president of

Port Washington, N.Y.-based NPD Group, a global market research firm, said Americans "like seeing restaurants serve more fruit" because it typically is a product purchased at the grocery store and brought home. But, he added, restaurateurs face the same problem as consumers: spoilage. He said convenience and cost are two of the primary factors that would drive consumers to purchase more fruit at restaurants.

Salads and fruit remain a small portion of overall quick-service sales, according to NPD, which found that 2.6 percent of all meals purchased at fast-food restaurants in the summer of 2005 included a main dish salad, which is up from 1.9 percent in the comparable period in 2002 but down slightly from 3 percent in 2004. NPD said 1.8 percent of quick-service meals included fruit in the summer of 2005. Balzer said fruit purchases were on the rise this year, mostly as a result of McDonald's and Wendy's launching new products.

McDonald's, the nation's largest burger chain with more than 400 million, which has "made us one of the largest, if not the largest, sellers of salads in the country," she said.

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HEALTH AND NUTRITION



NATION'S RESTAURANT NEWS

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13,000 outlets, continues to sell a \$2.99 Fruit & Walnut salad that debuted in May. It includes apples, red seedless grapes, candied walnuts and a side of low-fat yogurt. Some analysts said customers are buying the fruit salad in the morning.

"People are going through the drive-thru or buying it at breakfast and taking it the office as a mid-morning snack, or they are keeping it for lunch or for a snack later in the day," said McDonald's spokeswoman Danya Proud.

In terms of other fruit offerings, McDonald's has a 99-cent Fruit 'n Yogurt Parfait with strawberries, blueberries, low-fat vanilla yogurt and granola, and it offers Apple Dippers, which are peeled apple slices with a low-fat caramel sauce, as a substitute for fries in the Happy Meal.

Yet sales of the Fruit & Walnut salad have slowed since the summer, according to McDonald's franchisees. The chain declined to provide sales figures, but Proud said it remains "a valuable extension of [McDonald's] premium salad line."

Restaurant consultant Dennis Lombardi of WD Partners in Columbus, Ohio, said even if sales had slowed, "McDonald's has a history of good perseverance when they are sure they are on the right track. In 1977 when they first introduced breakfast it was not an instant success." He also said McDonald's



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— BOB SANDELMAN  
PRESIDENT, SANDELMAN & ASSOCIATES

size allows the chain more latitude to experiment with items.

Still, fruit and other produce are highly perishable, which often drives food costs up. Wendy's was dumping out unsold fruit nightly, according to published reports.

"For any of our salads, we don't hold them overnight," Bertini said. "So whatever we have in our restaurants, we have to sell that day." He acknowledged, "Fresh fruit has a short shelf life, and that was a consideration" in removing the bowl from the menu.

In contrast, McDonald's Fruit & Walnut salad can be

kept for up to one week in many restaurants, Proud explained, because the apples receive "a vitamin C bath" that helps extend their shelf life. She said no preservatives are added. Since launching its newest salad line in 2003, McDonald's has sold more than 400 million, which has "made us one of the largest, if not the largest, sellers of salads in the country," she said.

Sandelman's recent quick-service study found that nearly 80 percent of respondents buy healthful menu items on at least some fast-food visits, and about 28 percent buy these items on all or most visits. While a majority of quick-service customers purchase oversized items, such as extra large hamburgers, on at least some of their visits, only 13 percent buy these products on all or most visits, Sandelman said.

The same study found that 59 percent of fast-food users say there are not enough healthful offerings on QSR menus in general, and over half of all respondents say fast-food restaurants do not provide customers with enough nutritional information. ■

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