



Trends in healthy snacking

Americans have become a nation of snackers. One in four now say they snack multiple times per day, and 38% report occasionally replacing meals with snacks.¹

This shift from three square meals a day to numerous noshes has been coming for decades, as consumers adapt to increasingly busy lifestyles and changing family routines. Snacks have even adapted to demands for better health and nutrition from the foods we eat.

This is not particularly new, but what has changed is that the trend has become so important in foods and beverages that New Nutrition Business named it a mega-trend in its annual report, “Ten Key Trends in Food, Nutrition and Health 2021.” In fact, the publication suggests that snacking is at the heart of product development strategy – and that if you aren’t planning a snack version of your product, you should be.²

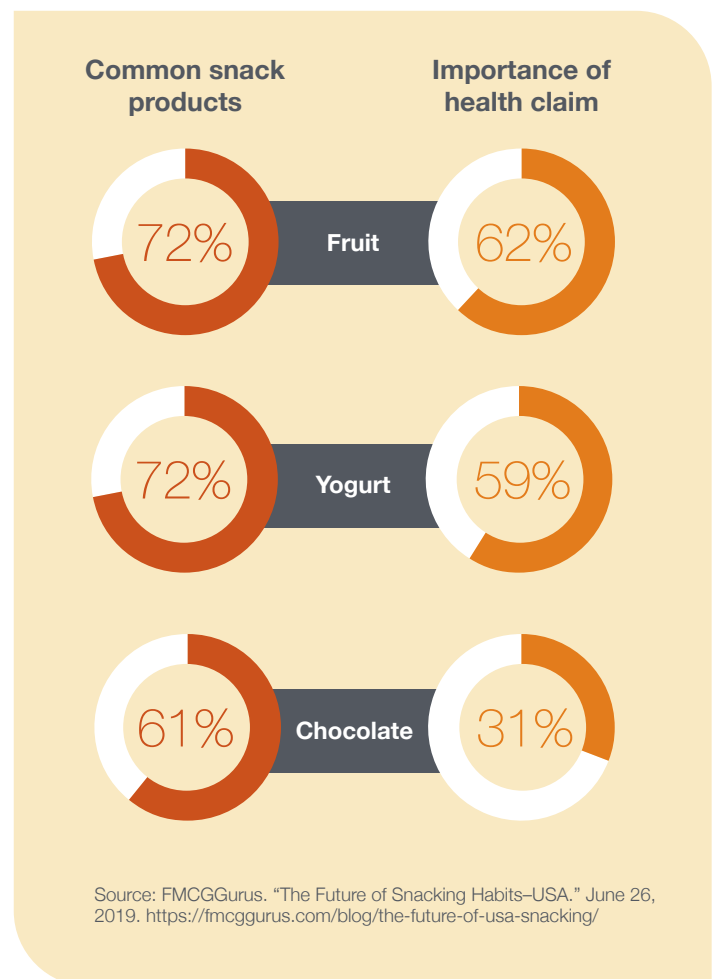
While experts may be divided as to whether multiple small bites are better for overall health than meals, today’s snacks are not the sugar- and carb-laden products that previously brought little nutritional value to the table. Now almost anything can be a snack, from eggs and nuts to pickles and beets, with corresponding good nutritional value. And consumers are eating them up. The practice of snacking has become so ubiquitous that 48% of all food and beverage occasions are now snacks.³

However, as with many other food and beverage categories, snacking has evolved as a result of COVID-19. According to insights from The Hartman Group, snacking has been vulnerable to lifestyle disruptions brought on by the pandemic. They noted that meals are an “anchor around which life happens,” while snacks are structured around daily activities.⁴ What this means, the analysts suggest, is that the change in daily routines and work environments – with more time at home – have spurred a turnabout in snacking. Consumers are now more likely to snack due to boredom and stress than they were prior to the pandemic.

But it is also true that the pandemic has prompted greater focus on maintaining health and wellness through diet. The 2020 Food and Health Survey from the International

Food Information Council (IFIC) noted that while one in three consumers are now snacking more because of the pandemic, more than one in five say they are eating healthier than usual.

The challenge for brands is to understand these evolving consumer attitudes about their snacking choices. For example, concern about snack products’ health and nutritional value does vary by type and occasion. As of 2019, Americans’ top snacks were fruit, chocolate and yogurt, but their emphasis on health claims were much higher for fruit and yogurt than for chocolate:



Innova Market Insights proposes that in this new era, consumers are looking for foods and beverages that support their lifestyle choices... and most of these are aimed at healthier lifestyles and balancing busy schedules.⁵ This implies that healthy snacks featuring an energy boost and portable formats with high protein content may gain particular momentum. Snacks that help balance both health and indulgence will also see continued traction.

Ingredients, plus sensory experience

The good news is that there are plenty of ingredients and strategies to help brands achieve these goals. Plant-based ingredients have certainly shown increasing demand and functionality in snacks. They appeal to consumers by helping to meet taste, texture and nutritional expectations in a variety of snack products without using high amounts of sugar or artificial ingredients.

Plant-based proteins, in particular, have helped push the envelope in developing snacks that feature a label-friendly perception, while also eliminating some of the ingredients that consumers want to avoid, such as dairy- and meat-based proteins.



These plant-based ingredients are also likely to play an important role in next-generation snacks, as consumers seek a deeper experience from these products. A 2021 paper from Euromonitor International called “Experiential Snacking — Innovating with Texture, Format and Flavor,” suggests that the sensory component of snacking will become increasingly important. Flavor, for example, has been a key component for snack products, but it may not be enough to sustain interest from consumers who are now looking for a holistic and tailored experience, especially as they spend more time at home.

According to the report, snack brands have begun to cater to these recent demands by offering direct-to-consumer delivery models, addressing health concerns and innovating in texture, appearance and entertainment value. Texture innovations that produce a lighter mouthfeel are appealing to health-conscious snackers. Crunchy and crispy textures are gaining traction in sweet snacks, as opposed to the traditionally popular creaminess and melting consistency that are now seen as less healthful.⁷

Snacking launches with high protein claims have seen strong growth from 2015 to 2019:⁶

↑16.8% CAGR

Energy and alertness claims jumped ↑13%

Snacks are seeing visual transformations as consumers engage further with the online world, from browsing and shopping to documenting their activities on social media platforms. For snacks, this is manifesting in new, bolder product colors and shapes that provide an exciting experience.⁸ One caveat on color, the Euromonitor report said, is that colors may invoke health concerns, so naturally derived colors are the best choice and can add a desired natural positioning.

A third aspect to experiential snacking is creating an experience for consumers to enjoy at home. This could include a new way for them to engage with a product, such as providing new eating occasions, summoning nostalgic memories, or providing personalized packaging or formats for gifting or special occasions.

While innovation and discovery will continue to be important in the snacking category, a key point is that new snacking needs and occasions are changing the nature of snacks themselves.⁹ This has given rise to a variety of new formats, flavors and textures. But what this means for individual consumers has varied – some people have turned to health, others seek indulgence; some people like to explore new tastes, textures and experiences, while others prefer the comfort of familiar brands and products.

The key point, according to the Hartman Group, is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution, so staying on top of snack category developments and rhythms will be critical for brands (at least over the near term), and may be an ongoing key to success.

References

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⁹ The Hartman Group. "Snacking 2020: Emerging, Evolving and Disrupted." <https://store.hartman-group.com/snacking-2020-emerging-evolving-and-disrupted/>