

SHOPPER FOCUS

THAWING ATTITUDES – *Frozen Food*

by POPAI UK *In-Store Insights*



Preface

For some, frozen food conjures up images of nutrition-starved ready meals, prawn vol-au-vents and 70s dinner party desserts. Until recently the frozen ready meal category remained similarly unchanged for several years and had become heavily reliant on promotional activity to drive sales, creating what was essentially a one-dimensional category. But now fresh thinking is leading to a healthier future in-store.

While shoppers clearly like the ‘just picked’ look of fresh produce, frozen food manufacturers and retailers are now offering new ranges at the top end of the market, and even celebrity chefs such as Jamie Oliver have used frozen products in recipes on their TV cookery programmes. It appears frozen food is enjoying a resurgence.

Indeed, industry analysts Planet Retail recently predicted that category sales are set to continue rising. In recent times though, frozen food has suffered an image problem. Indeed, a PR consultant for Iceland Foods recently summed it up as ‘snobbery’, claiming half of the population absolutely hates it without ever having bought a product, in an interview with the BBC ahead of a new TV series which captures what life is like at the frozen food retailer. In the eyes of retail marketers, it has also suffered another kind of image problem – the frozen aisle.

Constrained by the need for large-scale retail freezer units, resulting cold temperatures and the barrier of closed cabinets, it is a retail environment that has always greeted shoppers with a welcome that is far from warm and inviting.

Yet food firm Kerry Foods felt there had to be fresh opportunity for a category that delivered convenient food at a budget. So, the company decided to embark on a series of research projects with shopper research specialist, Shoppercentric, determined to convince retailers these opportunities did indeed exist.

From a shopper perspective, the results of the research were a real eye-opener for the business. There were the obvious barriers to purchase, such as the coldness in the aisle, and the physical barrier that the doors presented. But there was also a very clear role for the category as an emergency backup – the convenience meal of last resort. “The challenge for Kerry Foods was to create a stronger category proposition so that it was a meal of choice for shoppers,” says Danielle Pinnington, managing director of Shoppercentric. To do this, however, Kerry Foods had to address less obvious barriers that the shoppers themselves identified.

The first of these to be identified was the need to rethink merchandising techniques universally used within the category, with traditional coin stacked packs preventing shoppers from seeing what was available. “With products sold in sealed boxes and the most appealing parts of the pack design being well hidden from view, shoppers couldn’t see the food,” says Pinnington. Since the chilled ready meal sector was full of sleeved packs, shoppers had grown used to seeing the meals before choosing what to buy. And if they couldn’t see the actual food, they assumed there was something to hide.

Perhaps most surprising was the next insight to follow in shopper analysis. Industry professionals often refer to the frozen aisle as being the neglected sibling of the supermarket experience with promotional materials the dominant POS at the fixture. But research showed that this feeling had taken on a tangible form for shoppers, with many seeing the category as being unloved by retailers and brands. The absence of price or quality tiering, beyond value and mainstream, left nothing to tempt shoppers at the fixture or make them feel this was a category where quality was available. All these elements combined meant that shoppers didn’t trust the category to deliver anything other than a meal of last resort. The findings of the research gave Kerry Foods the insights it needed to reaffirm its view that fundamental changes were needed across: recipes; packaging; layout; and merchandising.

Over the following months, Kerry Foods worked with a number of retailers to deliver real change at the fixture, basing all the developments they presented to the trade directly on shopper needs. From better recipes - because shoppers needed to buy good food – to sleeve packs that would give shoppers greater confidence in what they were buying, improved category layouts to help shoppers see the choices available along with more engaging merchandising and front facing packs to demonstrate that the category was important to the retailer.

“By understanding the barriers that the existing category placed in front of shoppers, and recognising how to remove those barriers and meet shopper needs, Kerry have driven real growth back into a category that historically has poor dwell times and a distinct lack of warmth to the shopping experience,” says Pinnington.

ABOUT POPAI

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