



The Shopping List

CPG experts weigh in on whether the shopping list is still king for food shoppers and marketers, and the answer is yes — sort of

By Sharon M. Goldman

Shopping lists have long been an essential part of grocery store trips, both for the shopper who simply scribbles down what she needs on a scrap of paper and for the CPG food manufacturer who works tirelessly to get on the list.

But what does “shopping list” mean in this increasingly digital age ... when a shopper is less likely to have a pen and paper in her purse than a smartphone? ... and when an attention-span-challenged shopper has become accustomed to storing information in her apps rather than on a linear list? ... and when shopping online means the “cart” is the shopping list?

Experts maintain that the shopping list remains “king” when it comes to influencing what shoppers buy. For many categories, the shopping list is still vitally important, says Jeff Kjome, shopper marketing director at **Jack Link’s**, though he admits there has been a “great evolution” over the past several years in terms of what that list represents. “It can be as straightforward as a written list, or using social media, smartphone apps or mental lists,” he says.

And according to Debbie Zefting, director of customer and shopper development at pasta leader **Barilla**, the shopping list is often on the minds of CPG executives. “For example, we know that 79% of people decide to purchase pasta prior to going to the store,” she says. “We also know that 74% of people have some kind of list – and that written lists still rule, but digital lists are gaining ground.”

In the rush to chase digital trends, many have relied on mistaken assumptions about how consumers use shopping lists today, says Corbin de Rubertis, head of shopper marketing at food-focused social network **Allrecipes.com**. “We spent a number of years building and integrating with over a dozen shopping list apps but never saw more than low single-digit consumer adoption despite wide-ranging and cutting-edge functionality,” he says. The takeaway, he explains, was that “90%-plus of consumers aren’t willing to put much effort into their lists and remain content to scribble them on scraps of paper.” Consumers will, however, adopt and use “de-facto lists” like recipe ingredients, he says.



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Corbin de Rubertis, Allrecipes.com

A Tool for Decision Making

While the shopping list can be broadly misunderstood by marketers, at its core it is a tool for decision making, says John Stichweh, former director of global marketing at **ConAgra Foods** and now VP of client partnership at Seattle-based agency **Possible**. “Some expect the shopping list to be a complete list of everything to be purchased – but typically it is not a complete enumeration,” he explains. Certain things don’t appear on the list because they appear every time – such as staples including milk, eggs and bread. Occasional or new items are more likely to make it on the list: “For instance, you don’t need shampoo every shopping trip.”

Marketers need to understand the shopping list as a social artifact used to make decisions as a family, Stichweh continues. “When retailers and CPGs think of a shopping list, they often have the idea of a static item owned by one person that lists everything that will be purchased in a trip. That is why you see such low adoption of digital lists, built on bad assumptions.”

This has led to both successes and failures, says Allrecipes’ de Rubertis: “We spent a couple of years building and distributing the world’s most sophisticated shopping list that included user list items, weekly ad content, recipe box, meal planning, bar-code scanning and loyalty cards,” he says. “We ended up abandoning the product after failing to get more than a few hundred thousand active users. We then partnered with dozens of others, including industry darlings like ZipList, only to see them falter for the same reason.”

“We finally found success by dramatically simplifying the product from both consumer and advertiser’s standpoint.”

How to Get on the List

Some consumers list their favorite brands on their shopping list: According to Zefting, 32% of shoppers do, with a consideration set of 2-3 brands that are “acceptable” based on multiple in-store factors (what is on display, what is on sale, and what is “new” that catches a shopper’s eye).

However, many shopping lists focus on categories more than brands – such as tomato



John Stichweh, former ConAgra Foods director

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paste for sauce; frozen mangos for smoothies; or laundry detergent – so CPGs have to do branding work outside of the store to make sure their brand gets chosen in the store. Those that represent staple items are easier to get on the list than impulse buys, says Kjome. “For Jack Link’s, protein snacks tend to be more impulse items,” he says. “So the challenge for us is how to increase relevance to become part of the consideration set.”

That’s where understanding of the shopper is essential: “For example, we want to understand if there is an occasion where they may not have thought of buying our product, such as a low-carb, high-protein snack rather than just a breakfast item,” Kjome says. “We want to provide information that can allow them to make informed decisions.”

Today’s marketers emphasize understanding the shopper’s needs and how she digests different forms of media, says Liz Mayer, senior manager, shopper marketing, **J.M. Smucker Co.** “It’s pre-shop behavior that’s so important. We found that pre-shop is very important to one-third of shoppers, and nine out of 10 of those who pre-shop don’t change their minds in store.”

That pre-shop could be based on a review of the Sunday circular and clipping coupons, while in other cases, trips are completely unplanned and scrawled on a sticky note. “It could just be milk, eggs and ‘something for breakfast tomorrow,’” Mayer says, while holiday menu planning involves more research and planning regarding dishes and ingredients: “We have to make sure we know what the shopper’s needs are and what she is doing to plan her list.”

List-Building Mindset

Most CPGs concentrate on their own brand or category and don’t think enough about shopping lists in terms of the

overall trip, says Stichweh. “There’s a lot of opportunity for retailers and CPGs to use that mindset of list-building to drive their growth, rather than just presenting their item out of context of ‘The List.’” That means honing in on core use cases, such as recognizing that the “owner” of the list still tends to be the female head of household. “That doesn’t mean she executes the list – shoppers are more typically 50% male and 50% female,” says Stichweh. Often the male has been given a list to execute, and when the “owner” of the list and the “executor” of the list are different, lists tend to be more specific and detailed than if mom is heading to the store on her own. With the right list-building mindset and understanding, old-fashioned marketing still goes a long way to getting on the typical shopping list, he adds. “When you get to the point of a habituated purchase and you don’t need to be on the list, you’ve already won. But to get on the list requires good marketing.”

And if you haven’t gotten on the list by the time the shopper has entered the store? There’s always the idea of “list-interruptus.” CPGs can interrupt and override the list with the right display options, particularly those endcaps or pallets that present a solution to an overall shopping challenge. “At holiday time it’s about baking, for example,” says Stichweh. “There are many multi-category pallets or displays you can put next to each other to meet the needs of holiday bakers.”

A Work in Progress

Every brand wants to be top-of-mind when shoppers are in “shopping mode,” says Zefting, but the challenge is that today’s shoppers are always in and out of that mode. “It is no longer a process of checking the pantry, checking the circular, making the list and going to the store. Now a shopper might find a recipe and make the list,” she says. “So brands need to be communicating to shoppers in a variety of ways and times in order to be considered as the shopper makes the list.”

The bottom line? Shopping lists have essentially become a “work in progress” for most consumers. The number of shopper touchpoints has expanded “exponentially,” says Zefting. “Personalized, targeted communications will be the most effective in reaching a receptive shopper.”

The result is that creating a shopping list has become a constant, ongoing process, rather than a once-a-week event. “Even if you shop for groceries on Sunday, you might look at Pinterest-inspired ideas on Thursday and other content all week long on your mobile phone,” says Mayer. “The shopping list is still critical, but the list-building happens all the time.”

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