

Home > Features > Supply Side > C-Stores are Investing in More Advanced Countertop-Heating and -Refrigeration Equipment

Features Supply Side

C-Stores are Investing in More Advanced Countertop-Heating and -Refrigeration Equipment

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Today, competition is high within the realm of prepared/on-the-go foods, with grocery stores and coffee shops increasingly encroaching on the convenience-food space by offering expanded hot- and cold-food options.

To successfully compete, convenience stores need to pay closer attention to countertop equipment, such as heated merchandisers and refrigeration units that hold a wide variety of fresh condiments, toppings and coffee creamers.

In other words, heated merchandisers with poor temperature controls (which overcook or dry out foods quickly) or messy "ice baths" meant to keep coffee creamer cold are simply no longer acceptable. Instead, convenience stores are investing in equipment with precise digital temperature controls that allow food to be held longer, minimize food waste and reduce the amount of electricity required.

By doing so, convenience-store operators are hoping to gain a competitive edge by offering fresher, more appealing and satisfying options to customers that might otherwise decide to go elsewhere.

Heated Merchandisers

Heated merchandisers are the workhorse of convenience-store countertop equipment and must be versatile enough to hold and display a full range of ready-to-eat hot foods — preferably near the register to spur impulse buys.

According to Kevin McGrath of Creative Serving — a New Jersey-based manufacturer of retail countertop-foodservice equipment — convenience stores are squandering their profits when they burn, overcook and throw out hot food due to poor heated-merchandiser design.

"Imagine you have a 200-store chain and are making sandwiches, but need a full hot-display case to sell well," he says, noting that if hold times are typically 60 to 90 minutes, "you are

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throwing out an awful lot of hot food due to spoilage.”

Creative Serving’s Infinity Series of heated merchandisers can extend hold time to up to four hours and keep food fresh by preventing direct contact with a hotplate through the use of radiant heat in an enclosed unit with a riser system.

By sandwiching aluminum between stainless steel, this design takes advantage of aluminum’s excellent heat-transfer properties while also retaining the longevity and ease of cleaning of stainless steel. Removable, aerated serving trays also allow better airflow for extended product shelf life.

The Infinity Series also offers the option of mirrored rear panels. These reflect heat back into the serving area to extend holding time and save energy. The merchandisers also feature a digital controller for each shelf, allowing a range of items to be optimally held in the same unit.

The company also offers Mini 12-inch- or 16-inch-wide, three-shelf, convection-heated merchandisers that can reach temperatures up to 200°F — enough to hold food safely at HACCP serving temperatures.

Refrigerated Countertop Units

To accompany hot-food and coffee purchases, refrigerated countertop units dispense a wide assortment of toppings, condiments and even creamers that allow patrons to customize items to their individual tastes. The refrigerated units must not only keep the items at a safe temperature, but enable patrons to quickly add their preferred topping or flavouring and get out the door with minimal hassle or mess.

Creative Serving offers a range of countertop refrigeration solutions to prevent spoilage, mess and cross contamination, including units with digital controllers to improve temperature consistency throughout the entire cold zone and convenient hinged lids.

Offerings also include, units with a footprint as narrow as 15-inches, while holding up to six different condiments in a pan, as well as wider units that eliminate front-to-back scooping of condiments. Units can also be customized to feature different pan configurations or circular cut outs for pumps to dispense toppings such as ketchup and mustard.

Given that coffee-service is one of the primary draws for convenience stores, some operators are looking for any edge to further compete with the big coffee chains. This includes offering a variety of fresh-creamer flavours instead of serving packets of fresh creamer kept in messy “ice baths.”

Offering an alternative to ice-filled wells and costly and bulky refrigerated mechanical dispensers, Creative Serving’s compact, refrigerated countertop units can hold up to eight quart-sized coffee creamers.

To prevent freezing and allow easy pouring, units like the Coffee Creamer Caddy utilize riser systems that prevent freezing no matter the type of liquid or shape of the container bottom (flat or concave). Systems also incorporate an on/off switch to ease use and facilitate periodic defrosting for maintenance.

More information is available at creativeserving.com.

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