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Opinion: Improving Your Hot and Cold Food Offerings

Retailers are investing in advanced, energy-efficient countertop heating and refrigeration equipment

By **Kevin McGrath**

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July 23, 2018

UNION, N.J. -- Today, a battle is raging for the hearts and minds—not to mention consumer dollars—of shoppers looking for quality, prepared foods on-the-go. With grocery stores and coffee shops increasingly encroaching on the “convenience” food space by offering greatly expanded hot and cold food options, the competition is getting intense.

Simply increasing the menu of items is not enough. To successfully compete, convenience stores need to pay closer attention to countertop equipment such as heated merchandisers that hold everything from pizza and chicken wings to refrigeration units that hold a wide variety of fresh condiments, toppings and flavored coffee creamers.

In other words, heated merchandisers with poor temperature controls that 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 higher quality equipment with precise digital temperature controls that hold foods longer and minimize food waste. More advanced equipment can even drive down operational costs by reducing the amount of electricity required.

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

Heated Merchandisers

Heated merchandisers are the workhorse of convenience 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. The most advanced units even allow different food items to be held at varying temperatures on each shelf to maximize salability in minimal counter space.

Extend Hold Times

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. If you get typical 60- to 90-minute hold times, you are throwing out an awful lot of hot food due to spoilage.

The problem is that traditional, open-air heated merchandisers tend to place food items directly on an aluminum hot plate, where it is prone to burn or overcook. Better models can extend hold time up to four hours and keep food fresh by preventing direct contact with a hot plate.

Advanced heated merchandizers use radiant heat in an enclosed unit with a riser system. Sandwiching an aluminum plate between the shelf surface and the heating element enables left-to-right, front-to-back heat transfer underneath, which spreads and then rises. Removable, aerated serving trays allow better airflow for extended product life in the warmer.

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.

Another strategy extends holding time and saves energy further with the use of mirrored rear panels. These panels reflect heat back into the serving area, yet allow behind-the-counter staff to prepare, place and store food items for customers to grab and go as needed.

To enable precise temperature control on the widest range of foods, more advanced heated merchandisers come with a digital controller for each shelf. In this way, items such as pizza slices and chicken sandwiches that have different ideal serving temperatures can be optimally held in the same unit.

Mini Heated Merchandisers

Traditionally, heated merchandisers small enough to be placed near the register to encourage last second impulse buys have been underpowered, often using just static heat from a single heating element and a light bulb.

More advanced options such as very compact 12- or 16-inch wide, three-shelf, convection-heated merchandisers can reach temperatures up to 200 degrees Fahrenheit, enough to hold food safely at HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) serving temperatures. The units' aerated shelves also allow for better heated airflow that extends food product life.

When it comes to showcasing cookies, small heated merchandisers can also deliver a competitive edge. While some fast-food chains now offer cookies in display cases at the register, they are typically served at room temperature. A display case with a digital controller can be set to the ideal temperature so cookies can be served just like mom makes them: hot out of the oven.

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 to their individual tastes. The refrigerated units must not only keep the items at a safe temperature, but also enable patrons to quickly add their preferred topping or flavoring and get out the door with minimal hassle or mess.

Cool Your Condiments

Toppings and condiments can quickly spoil, make a mess and cross contaminate if not properly refrigerated, contained and dispensed.

Whether for hot dogs or hot or cold sandwiches, there are now refrigerated units that can better contain and dispense a full range of toppings, including salsa, guacamole, mayonnaise, sour cream, relish and even cheese, onions and tomatoes.

For instance, refrigerated units with digital controllers can significantly improve the temperature consistency throughout the entire cold zone. This not only improves quality and food safety but also minimizes product waste.

Traditional refrigerated units with removable lids can be bothersome to use, requiring the food item to be put down on the counter in order to remove the lid of the condiment container. Some newer refrigerated unit designs now offer a convenient hinged lid that can be easily flipped up and down for easy access to cold garnishes, toppings and condiments.

When countertop space is an issue, refrigerated units can even be as narrow as 15 inches wide while holding up to six different condiments in a pan. Wider units that eliminate front to back scooping of condiments can help to eliminate any potential cross-contamination issues.

Customization of the units can involve different pan configurations, as well as making circular cutouts for pumps to dispense toppings such as ketchup and mustard.

The Coffee Creamer Edge

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

The difficulty with ice-filled wells is it is nearly impossible to maintain a set temperature as the ice melts. Individual packets of creamer also make a mess and are a hassle to open, pour, and throw away for the customer. More costly refrigerated mechanical dispensers filled with large bags of creamer usually limit customer options to two flavors due to the amount of counter space required.

Today, compact, refrigerated countertop units can hold up to eight quart-sized coffee creamers.

To prevent freezing and allow easy pouring, more advanced units such as a coffee creamer distribution unit use riser systems that prevent freezing no matter the type of liquid or shape of the container bottom (flat or concave).

More sophisticated systems also incorporate an on/off switch to ease use and facilitate periodic defrosting for maintenance. In contrast, many models require an operator to go behind the cabinet and unplug it in order to defrost.

The most convenient refrigerated units for customers also typically include a caddy on top that dispenses other necessary items, such as sugar, straws and hot cup wrappers.

A Boost to the Bottom Line

With so much at stake, convenience-store managers and operators have many options to consider, to be sure.

By offering more upscale hot foodservice, along with refrigerated toppings and coffee creamers, c-store owners can also look forward to something else: additional sales once customers come in the door, multiplied by ongoing repeat business.

Kevin McGrath is director of sales for Creative Serving, a Union, N.J.-based manufacturer of retail countertop foodservice equipment.

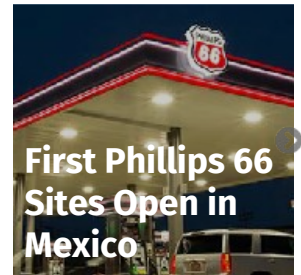
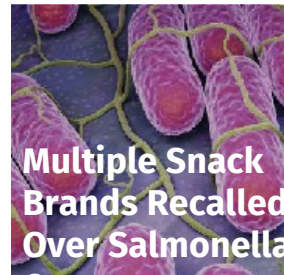
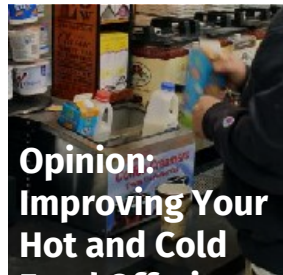
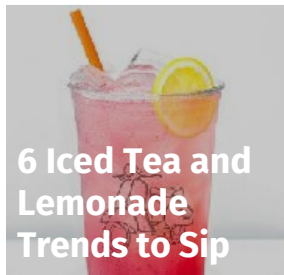
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