

Food, Set Free

New worksite micro markets drop traditional vending model to offer greater variety BY LAURIE BAILEY



From self-checkout lines at the grocery store to self-serve yogurt shops, consumers have become comfortable taking care of themselves, and sometimes even prefer it. Now, employees at three Westinghouse facilities—in Columbia, S.C., Windsor, Conn., and Shoreview, Minn.—have the option of helping themselves at on-site “micro markets.”

The micro markets at Westinghouse are managed by AVI Foodsystems, headquartered in Warren, Ohio. The Westinghouse facility in Blairsville, Pa., is also anticipating the opening of a Market C in upcoming weeks, says Keith Kantoris, AVI’s district manager for Westinghouse.

A NEW KIND OF CONVENIENCE

A micro market is a small food shop with a fully automated self-checkout. It is designed to replace traditional vending machines with healthier foods and more value to the customer. The emerging trend in food sales is part vending, part convenience store. Its sales are focused on a select group of consumers, those looking for convenient choices, but ones they can be educated and feel good about.

“Today’s consumers are more sophisticated. With micro markets, they have the opportunity to touch, feel, and view nutritional information before they buy a product. It’s a huge benefit for the consumer,” says Kantoris.

The fastest growing segment of the vending industry, total micro market product sales in 2013 were \$233.8 million, a more than 157% increase from 2012, reports food service industry consultants Bachtelle and Associates.

Taking food out of a vending machine and onto a shelf makes a big difference in the amount of variety offered to

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DYLAN NASSE, AVI FOODSYSTEMS

consumers, says Erin Rancher, brand manager for Market C micro markets.

“In a standard snack machine, we can put in 45 items, which have to be a certain thickness, and tested extensively to vend properly,” Rancher says. “In a micro market, we’re not limited. If it has a barcode, we can sell it.”

STREAMLINED SNACKS

AVI team members handle the store setup, installation of the technology and product stocking and rotation, Kantoris says. For customers who want to offer recommendations or report issues can call a customer service phone number posted in the market, and fill out suggestion cards available there.

Customers check out their selections at an automated kiosk, using a credit or debit card, or a Market C account card. Cash is accepted at the kiosk to be loaded onto the customer’s account card for future use. Employees are also becoming acquainted with a fingerprint identification method of payment, says Dylan Nasse, AVI Foodsystems resident director at Westinghouse’s Columbia location.

Whether it’s for a relaxing lunch break, a quick pick-me-up on a busy workday, or to refuel during the night shift, the Market C markets are open 24 hours per day, every day.

157%

total increase in micro market product sales from 2012 to 2013 (\$233.8 million)

SOURCE: FOOD SERVICE INDUSTRY CONSULTANTS BACHTELLE AND ASSOCIATES

“The most appreciative employees have been those who work overnight,” Nasse says. “Also, this benefits people who have to work on the weekends.”

If there’s a mix-up and an employee needs a refund, Nasse says a team member may be available to offer one right away. If a team member is not available for refunds, the customer fills out a refund slip and the credit is put automatically on their account. But, because it’s not a traditional vending machine, they’re not needed as often.

“When compared to vending services, there are a minimal number of returns. In vending, many refunds are provided because of an improper vend, or a product not being dispensed correctly,” says Nasse.

Market C stores feature a wide variety of fresh food offerings, including gourmet salads, premium sandwiches, and side items, typically costing under \$5. Popular items at the Columbia micro market include Second Harvest Wholesome Medley trail mix, Fiber One bars and diet and regular sodas.

“By far the biggest seller has been the Tassimo hot beverage machine,” Nasse says. “Our security guards have been the biggest supporters. They work overnight, and sometimes 16-hour shifts. Now, they are able to purchase the Tassimo product or an energizing cold beverage.”

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