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## What the Youngsters Want In Vending

According to insight from a recent e-focus group conducted by Chicago-based research and consulting firm Y-Pulse LLC, school foodservice professionals who handle vending operations for their respective institutions believe that youths are very concerned about product freshness, availability, and variety, similar to interests and demands of the broader consumer marketplace. Operators who participated in the e-focus group serve a total of nearly 200,000 students nationwide on a daily basis.

The recent e-focus group, which included participants responsible for operations ranging from full line systems to coffee service and specialty machines, revealed that the majority of these school foodservice professionals thought that the appearance of a machine is important to a student's vending choices.

While kids do, in fact, seem to judge a product by its looks, they also have more mature ideas about the practicality of vending, particularly at a time in which the economy is at the forefront of so many buying decisions among the general public. The majority of participants in the e-focus group said that they think youngsters are very concerned about pricing and that the method of payment is also a top concern. In addition, participants also agreed on the importance of assured delivery in vending machines to students.

Another indicator of the seeming maturity of today's youngsters, school foodservice operators who participated in the Y-Pulse e-focus group agreed that healthy foods aren't just on the minds of adults who stand before vending machines. All of the operators, in fact, replied that healthy food would affect the type of vending equipment they would request, while almost all operators said the same thing about fresh food. However, many noted that it is often challenging to supply fresh and healthy items via vending machines, and suggested that food and beverage suppliers would be well served to offer students more shelf-stable items that are considered healthy, fresh, and without a lot of preservatives.

Beyond providing feedback on what they believe kids want from vending machines, participating school foodservice professionals were asked to share ideas about their own ideal vending operation. If given the chance to create or upgrade their vending systems, a strong majority of survey participants rated "green" vending (such as Energy Star rated equipment and LED illumination) and strategies to ensure food safety

as important or very important. The majority of participants cited line item sales reporting technology and wireless technology for immediate access to sales data as important features as well.

School foodservice professionals' notion of an ideal vending operation is high tech in other ways, too. Nearly all of the operators polled said that the trend of cashless vending would somewhat or to a great extent affect the design of their ideal vending operation. Several operators said that their choice of an ideal vending setup would be impacted by the trend of interactive vending, although the concept of reverse vending—through which recyclable materials are accepted at the machine and consumers are subsequently refunded a deposit—is not yet widely viewed as a hot trend.

Interestingly, although school foodservice professionals responsible for vending operations have definite opinions about what and how foods products could be best delivered to students through vending machines, they are not always the decision makers when it comes to inventory management. In fact, according to the e-focus group, more than half of the participants allowed the route driver to control the vending menu, while a few said they relied on a standard load plan to stock each machine. Only a few of the participants used detailed sales analysis based on data to stock their machines or regularly reviewed the items put into the vending machine.

That said, however, when creating an “ultimate vending operation,” those charged with vending responsibility say they would utilize feedback from other sources within the school setting. All of the participants in the e-focus group, for example, said the foodservice director plays an important role in purchasing equipment for vending operations. Also cited as key influencers in an ultimate vending operation are the business manager or administrator, the site manager, and the assistant foodservice director/foodservice supervisor.

“The results of this e-focus group underscore the fact that today’s kids mirror the general marketplace: as with their adult counterparts, students are looking for healthy, fresh, well-priced, and convenient foods. In turn, our research shows that say Sharon Olson, partner with Y-Pulse. “Moving forward, as foodservice professionals look to become more involved in inventory management, the products and machines available to students through vending operations will likely reflect the changing concerns of this new generation. The mantra of ‘make it fast, make it easy, make it healthy, and make it good’ really does extend across the board.”