Feed the future

Having enough vegan and vegetarian options on your menu is not only good for business but for creating a more sustainable future.

Trading Support have solutions in place that ensure you're offering your customers produce you can trace back to the farm. Ethical Supply Chain Coordinator, Aqeel Kapasi, explores the issues surrounding meat procurement and how you can mitigate them.

Veganism, vegetarianism, flexitarianism: so many trends, so much information. How to navigate through? The food we eat, how it's grown, and where it comes from are crucial in our effort to tackle the climate and nature emergency, preserving life for humans as well as the other plants and animals we share this planet with.

Globally, agriculture accounts for 25% of greenhouse gas emissions, with meat and dairy being significant contributors. Whilst the increase in plant-based eating is welcome to help overcome this, vegan or not, it is also critical to consider how our food is produced if we are to move to a truly sustainable food system.

Intensive (factory) farming has the biggest negative impact on the climate, biodiversity and animal welfare and our health. Examples include high carbon dioxide and methane emissions, pollution of land and nearby waterways from slurry and pesticides, higher antibiotic resistance, and mass deforestation to raise cattle or grow animal feed.

In the UK, chickens – which are often seen as a more environmentally-friendly and healthier choice – are predominantly factory farmed. Other types of meat that find their way onto our shelves are often also farmed in the same harmful way, whether that's because they've been transported 'fresh' from countries afar, or because they've been processed into mass-produced food products through global supply chains.

It's essential that we move away from these methods towards more organic, seasonal approaches that also support farmers and communities. Through this we can build a food system that is just, low-carbon, beneficial for land and wildlife, and healthy and nutritious.

Student demand

Commercially, there's a sound case for moving in this direction too: according to research by charity Eating Better in November 2019, 76% of 18-year-olds consider the environment and climate change to be one of their top issues, with 25% being vegan or vegetarian[1].

Reducing meat options doesn't need to impact on your bottom line: a recent Cambridge University study of over 94,000 cafeteria meal choices found that doubling the vegetarian options – 25% to 50% – reduced the proportion of meat-rich purchases by between 40-80% without affecting overall food sales[2].

Our own research with Friends of the Earth in 2018 showed that 52% of meat-eating students say offering a greater range of meat-free meals every day in campus catering outlets would encourage them to pick meat-free options over ones that contain meat. Providing meat-free options at a lower price than those containing meat would also motivate 42% to make the switch[3].

So, with both a moral and commercial case, where to go from a trading perspective? Some suggestions are listed below.

Potential actions to consider

1. Champion ethical and organic farming methods for meat, dairy, fish and plants, namely by providing, whether in retail or catering,

   a. significantly less but better meat, dairy and fish, and

   b. significantly more and better fruit, veg, wholegrains and pulses

   (if both aren't done simultaneously there will simply be more options overall = more resources used = counterproductive!)

2. Set up a loyalty scheme such as Kale Yeah! - trialed at Portsmouth University with support from Friends of the Earth - where the purchase of six vegan or vegetarian main meals earned a free meal which can be veggie, fish or meat[4]

3. Run educational campaigns and marketing around the benefits of eating less meat and more veg, buying zero-waste, as well as the benefits of students eating at an SU food outlet

4. Trial products containing organic meat and dairy. Whilst this may be more expensive, it could be pitched as a premium offering alongside more affordable vegan options

5. Where alcohol is sold, ensure vegan beers and wines are available – preferably separating on the menu so they can be easily found

6. Change the proportion of meat-based meals to include a greater vegetable content

7. When buying fresh meat, ensure full transparency over the supply chain, including where the animal has been sourced from, and opt for UK-grown.

Sources:
1. https://www.eating-better.org/blog/climate-change-top-concern-for-british-teenagers
2. https://www.phpc.cam.ac.uk/pcu/veg-nudge-extra-vegetarian-option-reduces-meat-consumption-without-denting-food-sales/
3. https://sustainability.nus.org.uk/our-research/our-research-reports/sustainable-food/eating-less-meat
4. https://campaigning.friendsoftheearth.uk/kale-yeah/kale-yeah-guide-setting-veggie-loyalty-scheme

Root, Swansea SU's plant-based shop & café