Cans may be considered passé by many in the food industry — and even by many consumers — but they’re still ubiquitous on center store shelves, as at Food Lion’s more than 1,100 locations.

The Salisbury, N.C.-based grocer offers canned items in its private label Cha-Ching line, for example, along with analogous items from national brands.

“At Food Lion, we promote the key core [canned] items frequently and create displays that are easy for our customers to understand,” notes company spokesman Benny Smith. “Corn, green beans and peas are the core vegetable items.”

To further encourage shoppers to purchase these products, Smith says, “We are leveraging our current promotional strategy of BOGO, two-for-$1 and hot sale prices. Our customers have responded positively, as this helps them get the items they need at a [better] price, thus saving money.” When it comes to future rollouts of canned products, “we have concentrated on introducing new line extensions of products we already have, based on customer preferences,” he explains. “We continue to look at introducing new products later, based on customer needs.”

As for advancements in the packaging form, Smith points to cans’ “becoming more eco-friendly,” like Bumble Bee Seafoods’ Wild Selections seafood line, as well as to the fact that vendors like Bumble Bee, Chicken of the Sea, ConAgra Foods, Del Monte and Goya Foods are introducing easy-open cans, “since most Millennials do not own a can opener.”

Canned Heat

Such innovations are par for the course for the Washington, D.C.-based Can Manufacturers Institute (CMI), the trade association of the metal and composite can manufacturing industry and its suppliers in the United States.

“Moms have, for generations, relied on canned foods to seal in the nutrition, freshness and flavor of their favorite foods, and recent innovations — like easy-to-open and pull-tab lids, as well as metal cans being 100 percent recyclable — have made them even more invaluable for today’s families,” says Sherrie Rosenblatt, the institute’s VP of marketing and communications. “The canning process provides long-term food quality, as fruits and vegetables are picked at the peak of ripeness and canned within hours, which locks in all the freshness, nutrition and flavor.”

To promote “the myriad benefits canned foods offer,” CMI created Cans Get You Cooking, which, according to Rosenblatt, has led to “a sizable lift in canned food sales for those retailers partnering
with” the initiative. “Since the campaign launched in 2013, retail partners have seen canned food sales trends six points better than those who have not yet partnered with the campaign,” she adds, citing IRI research finding that “in just Q1 2016, Cans Get You Cooking retailer partner sales trends ran a full two points better than nonpartner retailers.”

One advance addressing both environmental and health concerns is the elimination of Bisphenol A (BPA), an organic synthetic compound, from can liners. “As of July 30, 2015, all ConAgra Foods canned foods made in its U.S. and Canadian facilities are packaged in cans with non-BPA liners,” asserts Chelsea Herman, associate brand manager at the Omaha, Neb.-based company.

Following ConAgra’s promotion of the move via social media and its website, as well as through various media outlets, “the response has been positive,” notes Herman. “We recognize consumer interest in removing BPA from our cans and are pleased to be able to respond to that desire and offer food that our consumers can feel confident in.”

She also points out: “Canning is an excellent way to preserve food naturally; many consumers don’t realize that no preservatives are needed, as metal cans lock in vitamins, minerals and flavor. Additionally, metal cans … may be recycled over and over. This packaging minimizes natural product waste from fruit and vegetables, enabling food distribution and a very long shelf life.”

ConAgra further enhances the freshness of its canned products by using the Flashsteam process on its Hunt’s tomatoes, which involves “simple hot water,” and then “[canning] them within hours of harvesting,” observes Herman. “That way, when consumers choose Hunt’s canned tomatoes, they can be sure they are getting vine-ripened tomatoes, as opposed to tomatoes in the produce section, which are often picked early and ripen in transit to the retailer.”

**On the Inside**

As shown by Hunt’s, what’s contained in cans is just as important as the packaging itself. First, however, shoppers need to be made aware that canned food is actually good for them.

“It really all starts with educating the consumer about food choices and understanding what consumers want,” says Rich Tavoletti, executive director of the Pittsburgh-based Canned Food Alliance (CFA), a consortium of steelmakers, can makers, food processors and affiliate members. “The drivers impacting food purchases include convenience, nutrition, taste and affordability. Canned Food Alliance works with its members and partners to enhance perceptions of canned food. Consumer research has shown we must improve consumers’ perceptions of the nutritional benefits of canned food. We point to a strong foundation of university research, which proves many canned options are nutritionally comparable to and sometimes more nutritious than their fresh and frozen counterparts. We must consistently remind consumers that nutritious food options can be found in the center of the grocery stores.”

To that end, “CFA works with retail dietitians to help educate consumers about the benefits of canned fruits, vegetables, beans, lean meats and seafood,” notes Tavoletti. “We offer a Retail Dietitian Toolkit [that] is free to retailers — and to anyone who wants to view it. The toolkit provides a recipe (for a cooking demonstration either in-store, during a media segment, a class, etc.); a tweetable tip; talking points; and a resource to hand out that supports the messages.”

He adds: “We spread the message to supermarket dietitians both directly via a monthly newsletter, and also by participating in conferences. ... Last year, we gave ... dietitians a What’s Inside the Can display to use in conjunction with their toolkit in cooking demonstrations and table displays. The goal [was] to help tell the story and teach people about the simple ingredients that go into canned fruits, vegetables and beans. There are often three ingredients or less in canned food.”

---

**Most Millennials do not own a can opener.**

— Benny Smith, Food Lion
Canned Goods

CPG companies are rolling out their own comparable endeavors, “Over the last number of years, we have featured canned products in the majority of our marketing initiatives, such as working with third-party registered dietitians and celebrity chefs to create contemporary, quick and easy recipes,” says David Melbourne, SVP consumer marketing and corporate social responsibility at San Diego-based Bumble Bee, which is also reformulating its Snack on the Run line to feature a “clean-label” ingredient deck. “Most recently, we launched our Only Bumble Bee Albacore Will Do campaign to promote the premium quality of our product offering and to position canned albacore tuna as a relevant, contemporary ‘go-to source’ for lean, affordable protein. The integrated campaign is supported with TV, print, digital and in-store media vehicles, and will run through the fall.”

Melbourne adds that “Bumble Bee actively pursues opportunities to work with our retail and customer partners to identify programs that can be customized to positively impact and drive the canned seafood category. For example, creating merchandising programs outside of the primary canned seafood aisle, such as tie-ins with fresh produce and/or other complementary meal solution products around the perimeter, are definitely proactive opportunities to drive awareness and impulse purchase among consumers that may not always think about shopping center store on each trip. The result can bring new consumers into the category, generate incremental sales and deliver increased profitability.”

Similarly, Chicken of the Sea, also based in San Diego, earlier this year launched Sea the Possibilities Challenge, described by Director of Marketing Maureen McDonnell as “an empowerment wellness campaign that challenged Americans to broaden their horizons through bold new foods” — the company’s product lineup now includes Sriracha Sardines and hardwood-smoked Kipper Snacks — “everyday experiences and epic adventures that can contribute to a richer, more satisfying life, both in the kitchen and beyond.”

Partly inspired by the recently released Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2015-2020 — which recommends increased seafood consumption — “the campaign [aimed] to increase America’s nutritional health through greater consumption of fresh and packaged fish,” explains McDonnell.

Visitors to the campaign’s microsite could select a challenge at one of three levels and then post an original written story, photo or video showing how they met that challenge. Chicken of the Sea judged the submissions, and weekly and monthly winners were eligible to receive a grand-prize cash award that could be applied toward future adventures. How well do such programs work? Despite the “terrific response” at retail to Only Bumble Bee Albacore Will Do, Melbourne still believes that his “and other brands need to do a better job engaging consumers and providing them with reasons canned foods are a relevant, important, delicious, affordable part of weekly meal and snack menu planning. With much of the growth coming out of the store perimeter today, we must look for opportunities to bring excitement back to center store. A big part of this requires continued focus on our tried-and-true consumer base, but successfully becoming part of the consideration set for Millennials is also critical.”

Joe Perez, SVP of Jersey City, N.J.-based Goya Foods, whose latest canned products are black olive and refried bean lines, concurs, ticking off the segment’s main advantages: “The industry can focus on emphasizing the nutritional value, affordable price and stable shelf life of canned items, specifically the equal benefits and nutritional value to fresh [and] frozen foods.”

Maintaining Integrity

Beyond the existing nutritional profiles of canned foods, many consumers are seeking products with particular attributes they perceive as healthful. According to Food Lion’s Smith, “Retailers are looking for items with no preservatives and free-from-GMO items,” in response to shopper needs, while Goya’s Perez notes “the expansion of product lines specifically [featuring] low-sodium and organic products.” Consequently, ConAgra introduced three USDA certified-organic Hunt’s tomato SKUs earlier this year: Diced Tomatoes, Tomato Sauce and Tomato Paste. The items “provide more options to the 45 percent of consumers actively trying to include organic foods in their diet,” said Ryan Pintado-Vertner, senior brand manager, Hunt’s canned, when the line launched in January.

“There are more than 1,500 varieties of canned foods available today,” observes CFA’s Tavolletti. “More and more, companies are offering options for all types of diets and lifestyle preferences. In order to meet consumer demands, the canned food industry will have to continue to maintain the integrity of the nutritious food that is inside, as well as the technology and innovation of the can itself.”

For more about canned goods, visit ProgressiveGrocer.com/cannedgoods.