



# Taste Test Tips

Taste tests give customers an opportunity to try a new product or produce item before spending their money on it. This marketing strategy is used by large and small stores to increase sales, and by food companies to introduce new products. People who have never tried healthy alternatives, such as baked chips or whole-wheat bread, may be surprised by their good taste.

Taste tests can be as simple as a couple of baked chips on a napkin. Or they can involve handing out samples of a recipe made with ingredients sold in the store. But taste tests are not simply setting out samples and letting customers serve themselves. To be successful, taste tests require interaction with customers and getting feedback on what they are tasting. This guide provides tips on how to set up taste tests that entice customers to try new products and increase sales of healthy foods.

## TASTE TESTS: FIRST STEP

Before planning a taste test, check with the local health department to find out if the store has the appropriate food permit. Generally, if a store prepares food for sale, it can also offer samples.

## PLANNING

- Talk with the store manager to gauge the interest in having taste tests in the store. Determine what days and times would be best — when the store usually has a lot of customer traffic. Holding tastings on a regular schedule — the same day and time — can help build interest in them. If the goal is to reach different groups of people, however, schedule them at other times on various days.



- With the store manager, identify the best location in the store for the tastings. Near the entrance is ideal. If space is tight, consider setting up outside the front door or carrying a small tray of samples around to customers.
- Discuss with the store manager what healthy foods to feature. Giving out fresh produce or other perishable items like low-fat yogurt may be a great way to move these foods off the shelf while their quality is still high.
- Determine who will pay for the food and supplies needed for the tastings. Grants or other funds may be available to buy the items from the store, or the store may be able to provide some, if not all, of the food and serving supplies needed.
- Decide how to collect feedback from participating customers. This information will let the manager know how the store's customers are reacting to the new healthy products.

## PREPARING FOR THE TASTING

- Any food served or sold to the public must be prepared in an inspected kitchen by people trained in safe food handling. The inspected kitchen could be in the store, a church, school or other facility. Anyone with food handler training can help prepare the food.



- Decide what to serve samples in and whether utensils are needed. A piece of granola bar or a couple of baked chips can be served on a paper napkin, whereas small plates or cups will be needed for foods such as yogurt and dips.
- Determine how many samples to serve and the cups, napkins and utensils needed.
- Samples should consist of two or three bites. For example, an orange slice or segment, or 1 to 2 tablespoons of yogurt are appropriate portions.
- Plan how you will keep samples at an appropriate and safe temperature from the time they are prepared through the tasting period.
- Call the store the day before the taste test to make sure they are expecting you and to remind them to have the products or ingredients readily available for customers to buy.
- Prepare evaluation materials. Remember to take pens or pencils if using a written survey.

## CONDUCTING THE TASTE TEST

- Arrive at the store at least 15 minutes before the time scheduled for the tasting to set it up.
- If the store has an outdoor chalkboard or whiteboard sign, ask to have the tasting announced on it. Put up a sign at the tasting station, and ask store personnel to remind customers to try the food you have prepared.
- Be sure the sampling area is clean, neat and attractive, with a place mat or tablecloth under the tray of samples.
- Display the food packages or the ingredients used to make the sample so it is easy for customers to buy them.
- Be friendly and encouraging when offering samples. Share information about the product or food. Let the store manager and employees have a taste so they can endorse it, too.
- If a child is with an adult, always ask the adult's permission before offering the child a sample.
- Ask people for feedback. If they don't want to complete a survey themselves, ask the questions and then complete one for them.

- Thank the customers, and tell them of the store's efforts to stock more healthy foods.
- If the tasting was for a recipe, hand out recipe cards so customers can make it at home.
- When the tasting is over, clean up and dispose of any trash. Ask the store personnel for any comments they heard from customers and any suggestions they have for future tastings. Remind them of the next tasting.

## COLLECTING FEEDBACK

- Keep track of how many people try a sample.
- Use a one- to three-question survey, with questions such as these:
  - How did you like this food (or recipe)? Answer choices could be the words "Liked," "So-so" and "Didn't like," or emoticons such as 😊, 😐 and ☹️.
  - Would you serve this to your family? Answer choices could be "Yes," "Maybe" and "No."
  - How likely are you to buy this product (or the ingredients for this recipe) at this store? Answer choices could be "Likely," "Unsure" and "Not likely."
- Choose the survey format you prefer:
  - Paper-and-pencil
  - An iPad and an offline Qualtrics or Survey Monkey survey that you can upload later when connected to the internet
  - A poster board and stickers to indicate customers' responses
  - Jars labeled with an emoticon — 😊, 😐 or ☹️ — into which customers drop a slip of paper
- Share the results of the surveys with the store manager and your community group.
- Follow up with the manager in a few days:
  - Have sales of the tasted items increased?
  - Have customers mentioned the tastings? Was their reaction generally positive or negative?
  - Overall, what do you think of the tastings?