

# Consumer-conscious trend will continue - states report

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Thomson News Service

OTTAWA--The days of thirtysomething Yuppies dictating what is sold and how are coming to an end.

In the next 25 years, Canadians are going to see a major change, for instance, in the way they buy their groceries.

Everyone from food processors to restaurateurs will be affected as the food industry enters the 21st century, says Brian Sundue, author of an Agriculture Canada report on future trends in the food industry.

North America's baby-boomers will continue to call the shots for marketers, except they're moving out of their 30s and 40s and into the over-50 segment of the population.

Statistics show the number of people over 50, now about one-quarter of Canada's population in the next 15 years, and to 40 per cent by 2026.

"There's a quiet revolution going on," says Sundue. "We don't know yet what degree of retooling will be necessary in the industry. (But) it's an important trend and it's going to have a significant impact."

Some retailers have jumped the gun and are already starting to offer new services. Loblaws stores have begun offering home delivery, and although it's not free, that won't matter to tomorrow's seniors, according to Sundue.

The tight-fisted tendency that characterizes today's over-50 group (many of whom grew up in the Depression years) won't be so apparent in the coming years. The new breed of senior citizen, having grown up in prosperous years, will be more willing to spend, Sundue says.

"They'll have a higher disposal income, and they'll be willing to

pay for service."

There will be more use of modified atmosphere packaging (MAP) to provide consumers with the high quality, easy-to-prepare products they will demand. MAP technologies combine freshness with smaller serving sizes and offer fully prepared meals that are simply popped into the microwave or dropped into a boiling pot of water.

Some changes, like the availability of pre-cut meats, have already come about, says Garth Sundeen, director of scientific activities at the Canadian Meat Council.

"Not only retailers but processors are trying to meet as many market needs as possible,

the main one being convenience, either through portion packed or de-boned products," says Sundeen.

But consumers shouldn't expect any great changes to satisfy the relatively small "grey" population that currently exists. Most in the industry will wait for demand to inspire them, rather than trying to build demand for a product they create.

"When you're talking new product, it's always risky," says Sundeen, citing an example of a company that introduced a low-fat sliced ham product too early and had to withdraw it from the market because of poor performance. When it was re-introduced four years later, it did

well because consumers themselves were demanding it.

Packaging will undergo a significant shift as well, says Sundue.

Seniors need the kind of packaging that's easy to open but stays closed when it's supposed to, says Andrew Aitkens, who recently founded the Canadian Seniors Packaging Advisory Council in Ottawa.

Shoppers are likely to see larger print on instruction and ingredient labels, as well as more use of graphics and symbols rather than words, he says.

"We've only just started the research, but already the response from industry has been very enthusiastic," says Aitkens.

Sundue predicts restaurants will make changes too, offering more non-alcoholic drinks, greater lunch menu choices since that's the most popular meal in the over-50 segment, and more early bird specials before the 6 p.m. dinner rush hour.

The aging trend may even mean the end of the superstore that grew up during the '80s. The bulk sales method that had become so popular as baby boomers struggle to raise families in a fast-paced, work world will likely be replaced by more personalized service.

But Sundue says it's tough to guess whether that means the small corner grocery store is on its way back.

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