

FLATWARE



manufacturers address new consumer preferences



The business is being driven by changing things up with new configurations and piece counts. Anything incremental that services the add-on or replacement customer, like sets of six or four, produces a lower ticket, but it's a positive development.

Flatware manufacturers are addressing consumer preferences with new, more practical configurations, more add-on options and more fashionable flatware that keeps pace with design trends. This more flexible approach—giving consumers what they really want while giving retailers more selling opportunities—bodes well for an industry that has been stagnant for the past few years but appears poised to grow in the fourth quarter and beyond.

The business is being driven by changing things up with new configurations and piece counts. Anything incremental that services the add-on or replacement customer, like sets of six or four, produces a lower ticket, but it's a positive development. The core business is looking up, but the growth is coming from doing different things. All the old ways of doing things are changing, giving [consumers] more flexibility is the name of the game.

One of the more noticeable changes is the new approach to boxed sets. Although the 20-piece set in the mid-tier retail channel and the 65-piece set in the upper-tier channel are

mainstays, some vendors have begun to tinker with different piece counts and different SKU configurations in response to consumer feedback and research they've conducted.

Research shows that consumers use the place fork, place knife and teaspoon frequently but rarely reach for the soup spoon or the dessert fork, which are the pieces that make up the standard five-piece place setting. On the other hand, many like to have iced tea spoons and steak knives as part of a basic collection. So some vendors are ignoring the five-piece place setting template and offering more practical alternatives, like three- and four-piece place settings and boxed sets that include steak knives or other popular items.

Although manufacturers don't see any major shifts in boxed set configurations, they acknowledge that steak knives have been included in sets "off and on" for many years and some retailers insist that they be included in expanded sets. Some feel that steak knives do better when they are in sets than in open stock. As for the iced tea spoons and other add-on pieces, many vendors feel they have found

success with carded programs that bundle those SKUs in six- or four-packs. A set of six is an easy pick-up and it doesn't hurt the core business. It's servicing a different need, a different customer.

Another retailer tests waters with a new "build your own set" concept that offers a basic 20-piece boxed set that includes six three-piece place settings (the place fork, place knife and teaspoon), a serving fork and a serving spoon. It offers the remaining SKUs in add-on sets of six. The program enables consumers to customize their sets based on their needs.

New and different configurations enable retailers to achieve certain price points (in the case of lower-piece-count sets) or attract consumers' attention on the selling floor (in the case of 32- or 36-piece sets because they are atypical). Then there is the growing popularity of pure open stock assortments. Specialty retailers like Zara Home, Anthropologie and Williams-Sonoma have generated consumer excitement around this concept, and larger retailers have started to pay attention. Soon one would see smart retailers trying to offer these types of things, through catalog options or better in-store displays. They are moving away from the stigma of the dollar store approach to open stock. This is different, it's about getting people to look at flatware in a different way.

The other way to draw consumer attention to the flatware category is through design. A strong interest in fashion designer flatware is evident just like in jewellery design.

Texture and unique finishes continue to be design trends. Hammered finishes remain popular and are a safe choice, while more daring options include stone and other finishes. Colour, too, is big. All agree that gold has enjoyed a resurgence, while titanium finishes offer additional metallic options like copper as well as funkier colours like black or bright blue. Hampton Forge has been applying colour to stainless steel via enamels and resins, a look, that is beginning to resonate with retailers. Some go for a black coating. It has a completely different feel and it's gorgeous.

Chosen for its hardness and veining patterns, olive wood is the latest material choice for Laguiole marquetry knives and cutlery. Knife handle work is essential at a French company that has been combining its skill with Laguiole cutlery to create knives and cutlery in solid marquetry for the past 20 years. The materials chosen to create its outstanding cutlery and knives often



Texture and unique finishes continue to be design trends. Hammered finishes remain popular and are a safe choice, while more daring options include stone and other finishes.



includes precious woods with innovative materials. The blades are forged in Laguiole and marked 'Line-Golz'. Metallic pieces are finished and adjustments and assembly are all carried out entirely at the workshop. Among its latest creations is made with olive wood, which has been chosen for its hardness and veining patterns. The olive wood has been used to create the Delta Shape table cutlery, characterized by a handle that widens gradually from the bolster to the tip of the handle, providing the cutlery with an elegant, ergonomic look.

Overall, clean and contemporary looks are trumping traditional designs. It's a very polarized market where there is strength in very clean styles that are simple, but on the flip side, there are always more expressive yet casual designs. Those more expressive looks typically feature sculptural elements on the handle, or reflect global and ethnic influences. Retailers are addressing the younger demographic in getting cleaner, contemporary patterns. Transitional designs give consumers the confidence that their flatware will coordinate well with mix and match dinnerware. Traditional always sells but consumers are clamoring for that mix. ■

Source: *Tableware International*

