The Grocer

Focus On: free from by Emma Weinbren (emma.weinbren@thegrocer.co.uk)

Publishing: 8 July
Advertising deadline: 23 June
Submissions deadline: 16 June

The Story

Seventy eight per cent of shoppers now regularly buy free from products, yet just a fraction have a medical need to avoid gluten, lactose and so on. Sales of free from products have surged by almost 40% in the past year, putting them on course to break the £1 billion barrier in the next year. Which retailers, suppliers and sectors are driving this? With free from now mainstream, where should such products be merchandised? Should we even be thinking of free from as a distinct category, given that it spans such disparate sectors as biscuits, sausages and dairy? And, given that penetration is now so high, where will future growth come from?

Key themes:

Price and promotions: Despite the past year being in grocery being chiefly defined by deflation, prices have been rising in free from. Why? This feature will explore how reliant brands are on promotions for growth in this sector, with particular attention being paid to the level of volume sold on deal in the past year, mechanics used and how this compares to the wider market. As the market becomes more crowded, will price become more important?

Merchandising: Increasingly, free from food is breaking out from the confines of specific, niche fixtures and finding a place alongside mainstream products. This feature will explore which retailers are most progressive in this regard and how great the rewards have been. How could retailers further improve the way free from is merchandised?

Convenience: That some gluten free bread brands are now moving into convenience is proof of just how far the sector has come. This feature will explore how well such brands are doing in convenience and how great the channel's potential is. Will gluten-free bread have the rate of sale needed to justify a slice of convenience retailers' limited shelf space? Should gluten free bread brands increase their shelf life to lessen the risk involved?

Innovation: This will be key to this feature. We will be investigating how new product development has shaped the category over the past year and what is in store for shoppers in 2017. We will be profiling the most interesting 12 gluten/wheat-free innovations plus 8 lactose/dairy-free innovations that have not appeared in The Grocer before.

Own label v brands: Own label is outgrowing brands, albeit from a smaller base, in free from. This feature will explore in detail which retailers are driving the growth in own label free from and how brands are looking to compete. How is the dynamic between own label and brands likely to change over the course of the coming year?

Advertising and marketing: This feature will also investigate how the marketing and advertising strategies of the category's biggest brands have evolved over the past year and how they will develop in the coming year to sustain growth or return brands to growth.

Key questions the feature is likely to address:

- What consumer trends have impacted the category over the past year?
- How have promotional strategies (both in terms of price and marketing) evolved?
- How have individual retailers' strategies impacted the market?
- How has merchandising changed in the market?
- What impact has own-label had on branded players?
- What's next for the category?