



By Fred Searle

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Big opportunities in 'free from' food-to-go

Fast-growing market for allergen-free products presents ripe opportunities for food-to-go businesses, say IGD speakers



Propercorn sales manager Rosie Joly

The 'free from' food-to-go market is growing at such a pace that even health food leader M&S Food "can't keep up", the retailer has admitted.

The food-to-go market is forecast to grow by up to 35 per cent in the next five years, with health and 'free from' both major trends within this expansion, speakers told delegates at IGD's inaugural Food-to-Go Conference on 22 November.

M&S Food, which has a growing range of gluten-free food-to-go products – including its Active Health range, Superwholefood Shaker Salad and protein pots – claims to sell around £500,000 worth of 'free from' products every week.

So-called 'free from foods' encompass products made without wheat, gluten, dairy, eggs, nuts, soya, sulphites and other allergens.

"The 'made without' market is a huge

market and it's really growing," said Marks & Spencer's trading director Stuart Forder. "If I look at the work we've done with [food-to-go manufacturers] Greencore and Bakkavor, we're selling around half a million pounds a week in 'made without' and, at the moment, we can't keep up. We think this is a huge growth market and we're committed to continue to grow it."

Forder admitted that when it first launched its Active Health salads and shaker salads, they didn't take off. "They were breakthrough concepts that were ahead of the time," said Forder.

"Unfortunately, we believe it was too earlier for the consumer at that moment in time, but we failed fast, and recently we've reintroduced things like protein pots, which are absolutely flying off the shelves."

Another food-to-go player that is profiting from the 'free from' trend is premium popcorn brand Propercorn, which has successfully positioned itself

as a healthy but great-tasting snack. Its popcorn comes in flavours ranging from lightly salted, to peanut and almond, to Worcester sauce and sun-dried tomato.

The brand, which shared its success story with delegates at the IGD conference, was launched just five years ago, but now has a 60 per cent share of the single serve popcorn market. It was the fastest-selling popcorn brand in 2016.

"For a millennial health isn't a choice, it's a normality," said the brand's sales manager Rosie Joly. Propercorn, with its "free-from qualities", is a snack that is "convenient but doesn't make you feel guilty," she added.

Summarising Joly's presentation, the event's chair James Walton said: "We must not forget that there are a surprising number of consumers out there who have special food requirements. 'Free from' is something that keeps coming up in a lot of IGD events at the moment. Clearly, the idea of 'free from' is still not fully developed – there is a huge amount of potential there.

He added: "Who knows where it might go next? Perhaps 'free from' will develop into more kosher, more

halal, more focus on the ethical and religious requirements of UK shoppers."

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