

Which food news stories changed QSR customer behavior most this year?

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What have QSR customers been talking and thinking about over the last year when it comes to the restaurant business? Perhaps not so surprisingly, customers are focused on many of the same big news stories that QSR leaders spend their days and sometimes their nights sweating about.

According to the 15th annual report on the top food news stories of the year, fast food customers have been most interested in industry news that affects their wallets, health, families and ultra-busy lives. In fact, survey sponsors Hunter Public relations and Libran Research & Consulting said in information about this year's report that many of your QSR customers are actually changing their daily activities and habits in response to these high-interest stories, including the top 11 (two stories tied for the No. 8 slot) listed here:

1. Amazon acquires Whole Foods
2. Another Chipotle food safety scare
3. Tyson's recall of nearly 2.5 million pounds chicken products
4. Trump takes aim at school lunch guidelines
5. Restaurant chain delivery
6. Funding the wall: Mexican import proposed tariff to increase Americans food and beverage costs
7. Meal kits
8. Tied: Unicorn food trend ties with delay of new FDA nutrition label
9. Avocado prices stabilize
10. Increasing competition for consumer attention from political news

As you can see, a majority of these top food news items either directly or indirectly involved the restaurant industry in some way, but the overall running theme appears to be Americans' concerns over the three factors of: food safety, nutrition and pricing. Additionally this year, the annual study worked to quantify each subject's impact along the consumer engagement continuum by measuring each story's effects on:

- Memorability.
- Brand and subject matter opinions.
- Consumer behavior.
- Sharing of the story with others.

Survey results were reviewed with respect to demographics, including age cohorts. But all age groups concurred that Amazon's announcement on June 16 of the acquisition of 460 Whole Foods Market locations in the U.S., Canada and the U.K. was the top item, along with its \$13.7 billion price tag. Likewise, the August announcement at the deal's finalization that Whole Foods Market customers would immediately see lower prices across a selection of best-selling products also worked to catapult the news to the top of the high-interest heap.

Chipotle's food safety scare back in mid-summer was No. 2, a dubious honor in which the brand made national news in both 2015 and 2016. Ultimately, those stories resulted in a 6 percent plunge in brand's stock price and likely had a lot to do with [longtime Chipotle CEO Steve Ells stepping down](#) from the position last week.

The poll makes it clear that Americans today are tuned into concerns about not just food safety – 48 percent of this year's story list – and food nutrition and health – 35 percent of the stories – but also national policies that affect the food they eat (items 4, 6 and 8), which a news release about the poll said is unusual.

Did the [Harry Potter Unicorn](#) start this?

Interestingly, one of the discrepancies across age groups in the selections for top stories revolves around the No. 3 spot on this year's report. The No. 1 and No. 2 stories were unequivocal choices across all age groups. But for the No. 3 spot, Gen Xers and Baby Boomers saw the Tyson chicken recall as the clear winner, while millennials minds were all caught up in unicorn food – super-sweet food decorated with lots of bright colors, [according to the MacMillan Dictionary](#).

Why should QSR leaders care though what news their customers care about? Well, according to the survey results, because such stories pack a punch when it comes to consumer behavior. In fact, those much-coveted millennials were shown to be the most malleable when it comes to news stories' affects on daily behavior and perceptions about brands and their products.

The surveyors said that such changes this year include Americans paying far more attention to food labels (a third of Americans), while 24 percent are boning up on food benefit information as well as learning more about how food impacts health.

Millennials were also more likely to try new foods and flavors and changed how they prepared food, their diets, shopping patterns and attention to the environment based on the top stories.

In fact, about the only thing distracting QSR consumers from even more involvement and concern over the food restaurants and others serve may well be concern over who is in the White House and how their actions affect consumers. For instance, that last item on the list concerning a "competitive media landscape" represents the fact that the overall deluge of news in this first year of the Trump administration is proving to be tough competition for consumer attention around food news.

That's proven in the survey by the fact that, compared to last year, fewer people this year said they saw food news as more important than other type of stories. The number dropped from 41 percent in 2016 to 35 percent this year, revealing the competitive nature of today's media landscape.