

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

1/1/2019

Canned Tuna Reflects a Changing Tide

Chris Beytes



CHRIS BEYTES

The Wall Street Journal recently ran a story about how Millennials (those aged about 22 to 37) are turning up their noses at canned tuna. The author cited market-research firm Mintel, which found that 32% of consumers aged 18 to 34 recently bought canned fish or shellfish compared with 45% of those 55 years old and older.

In the story, StarKist's Andy Mecs put part of the blame on kitchen tools (or lack thereof), stating, "A lot of Millennials don't even own can openers."

Ellen Wells mentioned the *WSJ* item in her *buZZ!* newsletter and the Ball Publishing editing team (which meets quarterly to brainstorm topics for future issues) started an email string on the topic. Jen Polanz, managing editor of *Green Profit* (and a Gen-Xer), was the first to weigh in:

"It seems to me that Millennials are saying, 'Even though we can't buy a ton of stuff, we still have standards and canned tuna is gross, so imma buy my avocados and fresh fish and live out of my car.' Basically, [Millennials] are picking and choosing, and they're choosing not to eat gross stuff."

Allison Westbrook, our in-house Millennial (and circulation coordinator and budding staff editor), agreed with Jen.

"I think Millennials are more selective about what they will spend their money on and want to spend their (limited, in some cases) money on quality products. There are so many products out there, why would I waste money on a bad product?" (She added that she likes canned tuna because she ate tuna sandwiches as a kid and it's nostalgia food for her. Also, she owns a can opener.)

Another Millennial, Mason Day of the GrowIt! team at Ball Hort, despises the stuff. "If it ain't sushi, I don't even wanna say TUNA. It's an awful word." But then he got practical:

"Times change. Technologies change. Kodak cameras don't sell like they used to. Blockbuster isn't doing so hot, either... No sympathy or pity for those who don't adjust. If StarKist can't sell fresh fish or realign as premium pet food, maybe they don't deserve to be in business anymore."

Hortistician Marvin Miller (who actually started the email string) focused our attention on what he sees as the real problem: marketing.

"To blame a decline in tuna sales on Millennials not owning can openers is a ridiculous abandonment of marketing

responsibility by canned tuna processors. If the can is a barrier to consumption, redesign the can or give away can openers!”

BuzzFeed’s Tom Gara, via Twitter and quoted in *The Washington Post*, agreed with Marvin, even if he didn’t know it: “There’s only one way to get Millennials eating tuna again: it needs to be in a bright white unmarked can with a single blue stripe running across the middle, sold only via online subscription for \$5 a month.” (I suspect he’s referencing Blue Apron or a similar meal delivery service.)

By now, either you’re hollering “Get to the point!” or else you’ve got a strange hankering for a tuna melt. Or both. Fine. My point is that tuna is a metaphor for all products and services that Millennials (the next giant horde of consumers) will either be embracing or rejecting. Numbering about 75 million, it doesn’t take too big a percentage of Millennials to make or break a category, as they’ve apparently done with canned tuna.

Of course, StarKist has had foil-packed tuna since 2000 and you can buy tuna in pull-tab cans, so it’s truly not about the opener. Is there a market for a higher grade of canned tuna? Do Millennials know about albacore (my personal favorite)? Why cans, period? Why isn’t there a line of StarKist frozen sushi-grade tuna or prepared tuna meals? Are they so invested in canning that they can’t move on?

We need to think the same way about our products and services: How are we evolving to meet changing needs, tastes and desires? Sure, you can stay as you are and sell to an ever-dwindling audience. Maybe even specialize in nostalgia (like those soda shops that sell Moxie and Charleston Chew).

Maybe tuna’s problem is as simple as “the unglamorous packaging and stodgy connotations of a can,” writes Maura Judkis in *The Washington Post*.

“After all, several food trend prognosticators ... have written about how chefs and tastemakers have sparked an interest in high-quality imported preserved seafood lately. But when they talk about it, they don’t call those sardines canned—they’re tinned.” **GT**