



## Desires, Barriers and Directions for Shared Meals at Home

*A white paper produced for the Food Marketing Institute Foundation by The Hartman Group, June 2017*

American families want to eat at home together more often. They appreciate the social, emotional, healthful and financial benefits of family meals at home. However, food shoppers say they find it difficult to achieve family meals as often as they would like. Breakfasts and lunches have become routinely solitary or away-from-home experiences. Even at dinner, the most family-centric occasion in American eating culture, families face practical barriers, cultural headwinds and a food landscape that has yet to catch up fully with their fundamental needs. As many as half of all dinners are either eaten alone, eaten away from home or skipped altogether, leaving families searching for solutions. Families themselves have been changing, outpacing cultural support for shared eating routines. What can food retailers do to help them?

FMI Foundation's National Family Meals Month™ aims to ENCOURAGE ONE MORE FAMILY MEAL—BREAKFAST, LUNCH OR DINNER—AT HOME EACH WEEK.

- This is about **“encouraging”** families to do something they already want to do, rather than convincing them to change their ideals. Beyond encouragement, consumers are looking for solutions from stores, from products, from friends and from the media.
- The focus is on **“families”** because eating together is often about enjoying food with our relatives, our friends or those we live with – and help is needed in large part because household living arrangements have changed faster than our ability to build eating routines around them.
- **“One more meal each week,”** per adult, child or family, is a seemingly modest goal given how many breakfasts, lunches and dinners are currently eaten alone or away from home, but also a meaningful goal since it calls for a stable adjustment to the ongoing weekly rhythms and routines of family life.
- **“At home together”** is how Americans want to eat. (See Chart 2.) Adults continue to eat most meals at home and believe that home-prepared meals are healthier than those acquired from restaurants. Also, many households cherish “togetherness” as the ideal of mealtime eating.

## SITUATION: ONLY HALF OF DINNERS ARE NOW FAMILY MEALS

As Americans, we are increasingly eating alone: When a typical adult in the U.S. has something to eat or drink during the week, half of the time (46%) this is a solitary occasion. It's not just for our brief but ubiquitous snacks, and it's not just people who live alone: Among all adults, only 59% of meals are eaten together, and the growth in alone eating outpaces the growth in single-person households.<sup>1</sup>

Breakfast, the most solitary of meals, is eaten alone just over half (54%) of the time. Lunches include more social eating when away from home, as often with a friend or colleague as with a spouse. Families with children younger than 18 years can expect them to be at school for lunch half of the days of the year,<sup>2</sup> and in a large majority of couples, especially those with children, at least one partner works full-time outside the home.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, when American adults do eat lunch at home, other family members are quite often absent, and lunchtime sees by far the lowest rate of successful “family meals at home”: Lunch is prepared and eaten at home with others only 23% of the time. (See Chart 1.)

**CHART 1: FAMILY MEAL SUCCESS AMONG HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN**

MEAL	Possible Family Meals (Days/week)	Meals Eaten 	With Family 	At Home 	Prepared at Home 	Family Meals as % of Possible
BREAKFAST	7.0	5.5	2.8	2.4	2.3	33%
LUNCH	7.0	5.8	2.3	1.8	1.6	23%
DINNER	7.0	6.2	4.7	3.9	3.5	50%

Source: FMI U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends 2017. N=354 shoppers with children.<sup>3</sup>

Dinner is the most consistent and social of all our meals, but even at dinnertime, skipped meals and missed connections abound. Each day, 19% of U.S. adults skip dinner, 18% of dinners are eaten away from home, and of those eaten at home, 29% are eaten alone.<sup>1</sup> Even among parents living with children younger than 18 years, dinners regularly devolve into solitary or fragmented eating occasions. Parents estimate that they enjoy dinner with their children on average 4.7 times per week, about 10% less than they would like.<sup>4</sup> Even that is an optimistic estimate; more nuanced measurements of daily behaviors suggest that parents eat home-prepared dinners with their child or spouse only half the time (**3.5 times out of 7 possible dinners each week**).<sup>3</sup>

## THE UPSIDE: FAMILY MEALS ARE BENEFICIAL

Why should family meals be recovered and supported? Benefits seen in sharing meals at home arise from the convergence of two distinct components, each of which individually creates perceived advantages: eating HOME-PREPARED meals and eating TOGETHER, especially with family.

Positive perceptions of HOME-PREPARED meals can include:

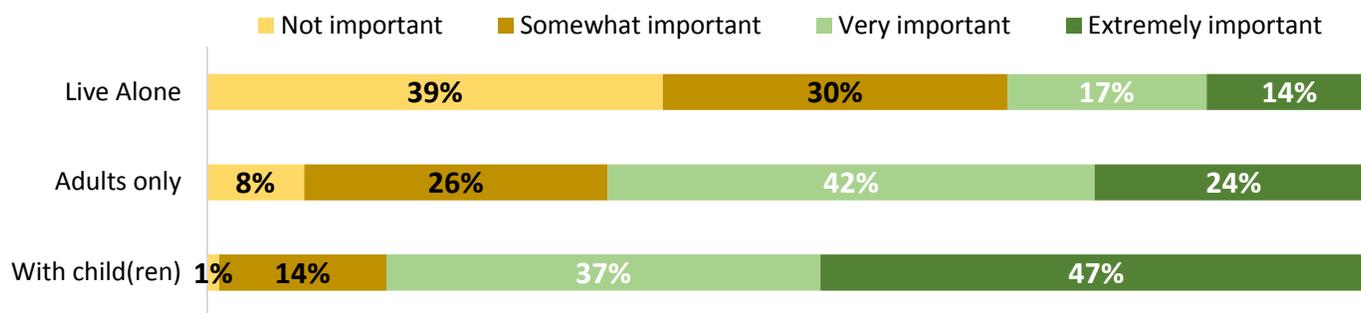
- **Health:** Most Americans believe home-prepared food is healthier than restaurant food.<sup>3</sup>
- **Enjoyment:** Most adults enjoy food preparation.<sup>5,6</sup>
- **Value:** Preparing one’s own food is believed to save money compared to eating out.<sup>7</sup>

# 88% of U.S. adults say they eat healthier at home than when they eat out

Positive perceptions of EATING TOGETHER can include:

- **Enjoyment:** Parents believe it is important to eat with their children (see Chart 2) and tend to WANT to eat with their children more. This is especially true for middle-aged fathers.<sup>4</sup> When parents eat dinner alone, they find their own evening meal less satisfying.<sup>1</sup>
- **Value:** When adults find themselves eating alone, they often report choosing restaurants or takeout because of the inefficiency of cooking for one. Conversely, preparing food to share among many eaters allows for economy of scale.<sup>7</sup>

## CHART 2: PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF EATING AT HOME TOGETHER WITH FAMILY



Source: FMI U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends 2017. N=211 shoppers who live alone, N=519 live with other adult only, N=354 live with children.<sup>3</sup>

Social scientists, nutritionists and public health researchers tend to agree with these lay perceptions but also find additional benefits linked to family meals, both specific and general:

- **BENEFITS OF HOME-PREPARED MEALS:** On days when restaurants are used in lieu of home-prepared meals, dietary quality declines. Adults and children who eat at home more regularly are less likely to suffer from obesity.<sup>8</sup> Reducing away-from-home eating leads to healthier children.<sup>9</sup>
- **BENEFITS OF EATING TOGETHER:** Numerous studies have found that "eating with others, particularly family, is associated with healthier dietary outcomes" for both children and adults.<sup>10</sup> Historical and anthropological studies of everyday eating norms have revealed how shared meals have been essential for family bonding and the development of ethical children.<sup>11</sup> To this end, further research suggests that teens who eat dinner with their parents regularly develop better relationships with them, do better in school, and are at lower risk of using drugs, drinking or smoking.<sup>12</sup>

Consumers will often report that eating alone enables them to select foods they believe are more aligned with their personal approach to health (and tailored to their own bodily needs). However, social scientists observing how eaters actually behave note that eating with others encourages important social and cultural mechanisms that enable individuals to eat healthier. Self-regulation to avoid overeating may rely on the presence of other eaters who both model norms and monitor behaviors.<sup>13</sup>

Taking a broader perspective, among countries in the developed world, those with food cultures centered on food enjoyment and conviviality, with widely shared, more sacrosanct mealtimes, currently enjoy better health outcomes (improved dietary quality, lower rates of obesity) than those that have reduced food and whose fragmented mealtimes have encouraged individualized eating.<sup>14</sup> Such findings underscore the notion that culturally we are well served by taking the time to savor our food and each other.

**86%** of parents who miss some dinners with their child each week are taking specific steps to eat with their child more

Source: FMI/Shopping for Health 2016, QD03, N=190 parents with children 0-17 years who eat with child less than 7 days per week.<sup>4</sup>

**74%** of parents specifically want their food stores to assist them with family meals

Source: FMI Shopping for Health 2016, Q1013, N=355 parents with children 0-17 years.<sup>4</sup>

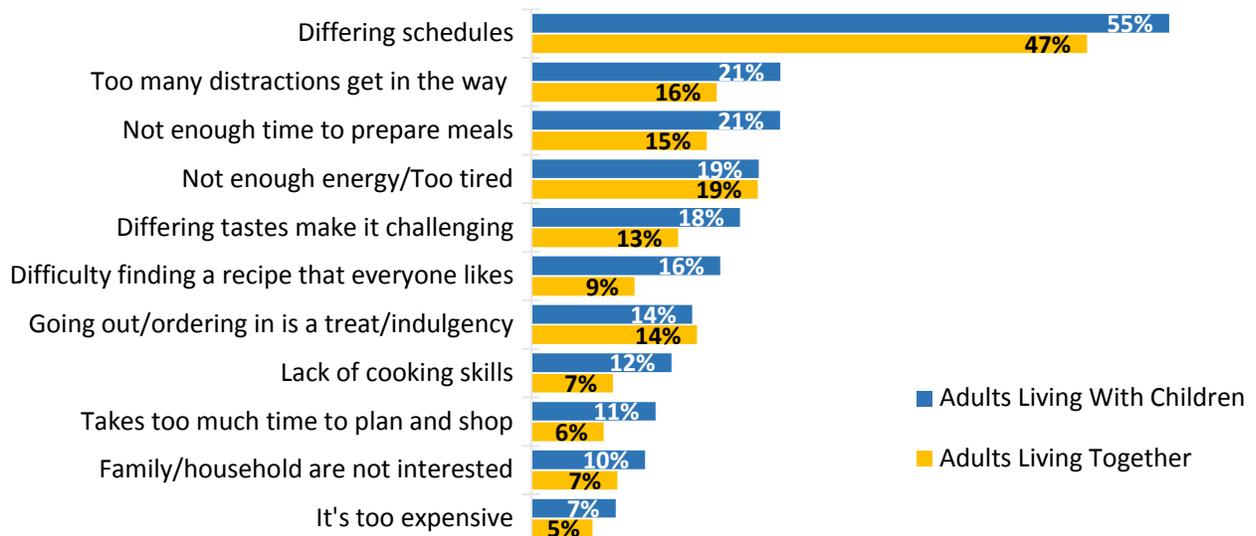
### BARRIERS TO FAMILY MEALS

Breakfast has not been a priority for social eating, and lunch has presented little opportunity to eat with others at home, but family dinners are hindered by barriers that can be understood and possibly overcome.

For most adults, breakfast-time eating focuses on something quick, healthful and individualized, with other activities such as dressing and commuting taking priority.<sup>1,15</sup> Compared to challenges around convenience and health, barriers to social, family breakfasts have not been extensively examined. When it comes to lunch, other countries value communal lunches enough to provide windows of time to return home in the middle of the work/school day.<sup>14</sup> However, in the U.S., as noted earlier, out-of-home work or school usually precludes weekday family meals. On the other hand, eating dinners together at home is both a priority and an ongoing challenge for large numbers of Americans. Seventy-one percent of parents say that ideally, they would like to eat dinner with their children every single night.<sup>4</sup> Adults already believe that eating family dinners is important, but even among families with children younger than 18 years, family dinners fail to occur as often as they succeed (50% of the time).<sup>3</sup>

Given widespread cultural desires to eat shared dinners at home consistently, why are opportunities for family dinners lost so frequently? The main obstacles appear to lie in how family life is organized today, how people live and work, and where food fits into their daily routines. Importantly, this may place food retailers in a better position to make a difference than other sectors of the food industry.

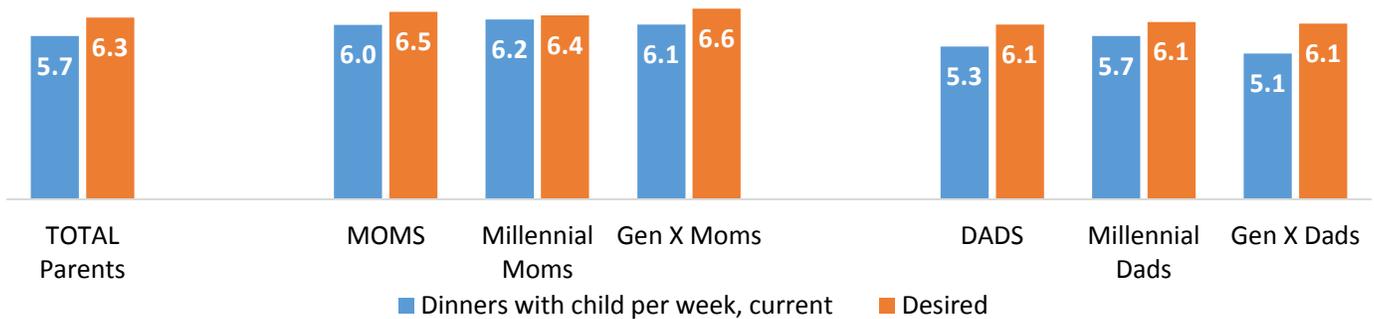
**CHART 3: OBSTACLES TO DINNER AT HOME WITH FAMILY, BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE**



Source: FMI U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends 2017. N=519 adults living together (with other adult only), N=354 adults living with children.<sup>3</sup>

Among many of the obstacles to eating dinner at home with the family, the most often experienced is the fundamental difficulty of getting family members together at the same time for dinner. (See Chart 3.) Parents with children will readily discuss strategies for **coordinating their child's hunger with the arrival of dinner**, balancing the need to keep their kids from “crashing” against the desire to avoid “spoiling their appetite.” More commonly, though, it's the adults who pose the bigger problem. Especially after children begin school, two working parents is now the norm.<sup>16</sup> **Dual incomes mean dueling schedules.** More often than either parent would like, one of them misses out on the family dinner. While both parents wish they could eat with their children more frequently, fathers typically aspire to eat as many family dinners as mothers already do.<sup>4</sup> (See Charts 4.)

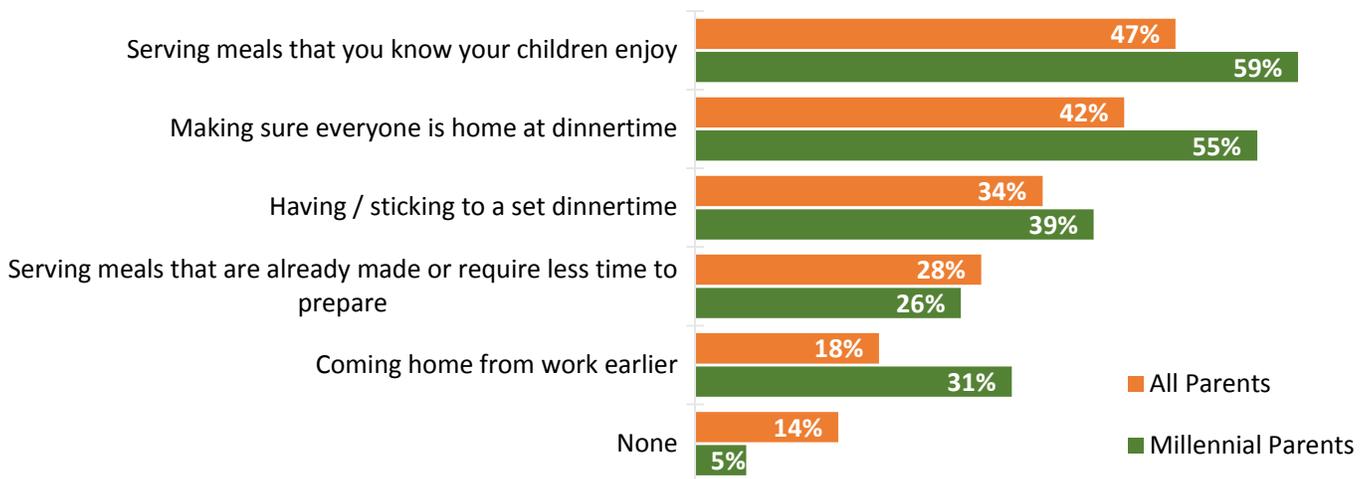
**CHART 4: CURRENT VERSUS DESIRED DINNERS SHARED WITH CHILD PER WEEK, BY GENDER AND GENERATION**



Source: FMI Shopping for Health 2016, Q1012, QD02, N=356 primary shopper parents with children 0-17 years. Totals include Boomer parents.<sup>4</sup>

Even before (or absent) parenthood, adults living together find it challenging to coordinate their schedules for a common dinner time. Compared to other nations, Americans today have a broader window for dinnertime, widely spread over 4-5 hours (4pm-9pm) with a relatively shallow peak from 6pm-7pm.<sup>17,18</sup> Work schedules in the U.S. today do not recognize a culturally shared expectation for a narrow, fixed dinner time, and young working-age adults living together allow their schedules to misalign enough to put shared dinners at risk. When they become parents, far more adults attempt to solve their family meal deficit through fixing their dinner time (making it more consistent, arriving on schedule) than by fixing dinner in less time (through reliance on convenient meal solutions). (See Chart 5.)

**CHART 5: STEPS BEING TAKEN TO EAT WITH KIDS MORE OFTEN**



Source: FMI Shopping for Health 2016, QD03, N=190 parents with children 0-17 years who eat with child less than 7 days per week.

As noted above, alongside and perhaps contributing to family dining challenges is a broader set of cultural attitudes about food and eating: When food is about nutrition rather than enjoyment, and eating is about health rather than social engagement, eating alone becomes an acceptable (or possibly preferred) alternative. In this deep but malleable cultural milieu, Americans – through the accumulation of many life choices – co-create a landscape of home, work and family life that makes routines of consistent shared home meals ever-more difficult to sustain.

## AMERICA'S CHANGING FAMILIES

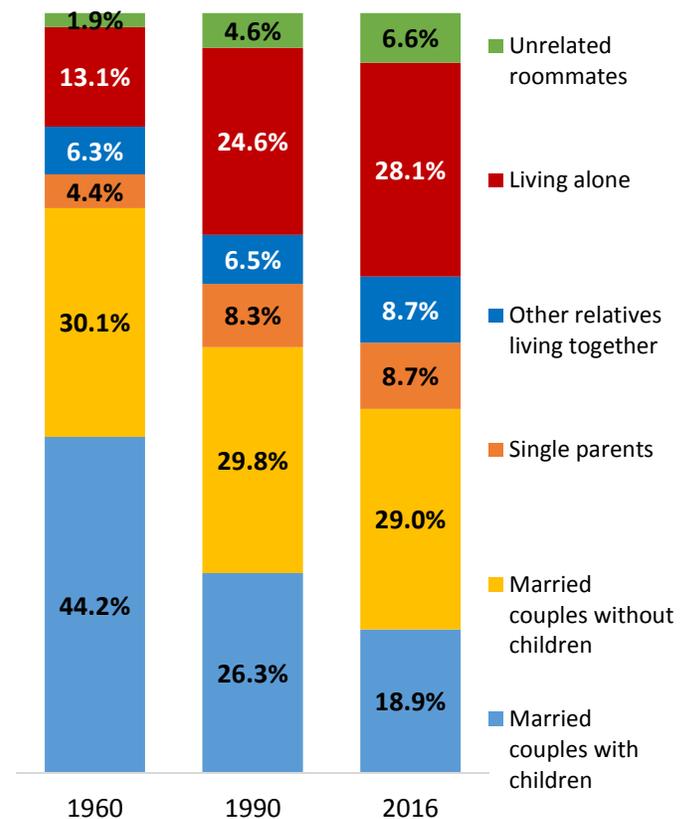
If daily challenges faced by families have fueled a decline in family meals, just as important is the changing character of the family itself. Household living arrangements have changed faster than our ability to rebuild comfortable eating routines around them. The once dominant "traditional" family form into which Baby Boomers were born has been supplanted by a diversity of child-raising arrangements. Fewer than half of all children today live with two parents in their first marriage.<sup>19</sup> Around 10% of children today live with a grandparent.<sup>20</sup> Multigenerational households have become more common in tandem with immigration from Asia and Central and South America, longer lifespans and economic distress.<sup>21</sup>

The even bigger picture is that household living arrangements in the U.S. have become less and less organized around marriage or raising children. Fewer than half of all households today comprise a married couple, down from three-fourths during the 1960s. (See Chart 6.) Little more than a fourth of households today include a child younger than 18 years, down from almost half at the end of America's Baby Boom. While the 1970s-80s saw growth in single parenthood, the larger shifts since then have been towards what the Census perhaps unfairly calls "non-family households": Adults living alone or with unrelated roommates. As the average age of marriage has drifted older, a new life stage in young adulthood has emerged between leaving home and settling down, variously termed "emerging adulthood" or "post adolescence."<sup>22</sup> With higher divorce rates and longer life expectancy, another life stage has lengthened and evolved in early seniorhood,<sup>23</sup> comprising diverse empty-nest and isolated-senior living arrangements. Thus, for both young and old, the years of so-called "family" living have eroded or been displaced, along with their everyday opportunities for archetypal family meals.

In short, while "family meals" may once have revolved around married life and children, today's eaters live in new situations with dramatically different household structures and habits. An alternative to lamenting the "lost families" of yesteryear would be to extend the focus of family meals to embrace the full breadth of living arrangements today. When adults living alone are included, they account for more than one-third of lost family dinners (social, eaten and prepared at home), and families with children comprise only a small portion of the family-dinner opportunity. (See Chart 7.)

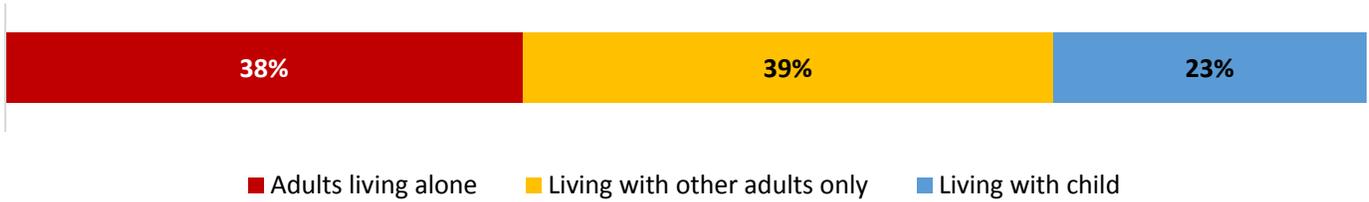
The U.S. Census may continue to define "families" in terms of blood relations and marriage/guardianship commitments, but food retailers seeking to help shoppers achieve their ambitions for sharing healthful, convivial meals have the opportunity to address the full range of America's new family diversity.

**CHART 6: U.S. HOUSEHOLD TYPES, 1960-2016**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements. Analysis by The Hartman Group, 2017.<sup>24</sup> Vespa J, Lewis JM, and Kreider RM, America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2012, U.S. Census Bureau. Aug 2013.<sup>25</sup>

## CHART 7: LOST SOCIAL DINNERS AT HOME, BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE



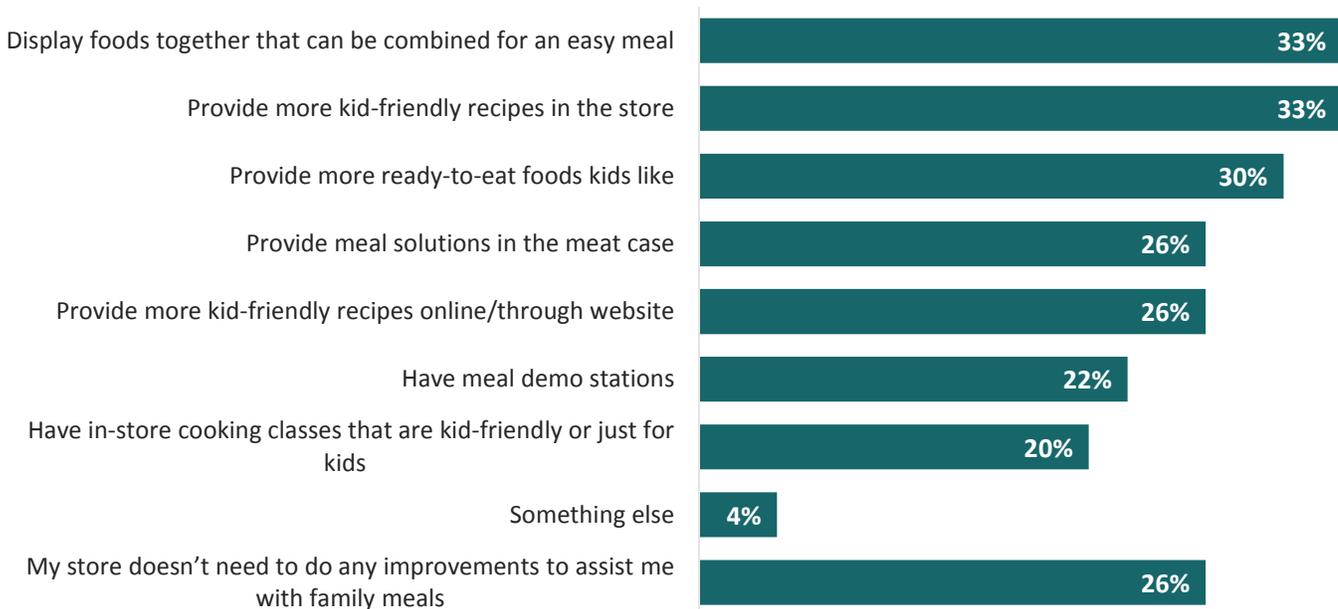
Source: Compass Eating Occasions 2014-2016, The Hartman Group. N=33,485.<sup>1</sup> Lost Social Dinners include dinners that are either skipped, eaten alone, eaten away from home and/or sourced from non-retail channels only. Based on recollections of past-day eating behaviors.

## SOLUTIONS TO ELEVATE FAMILY MEALS

Consumers themselves are looking to the food and beverage industry for solutions that enable them to navigate the challenges they experience as immutable (fragmented schedules, fragmented tastes or solitary living). Industry does this by providing:

- More convenient at-home meal preparations
- Options more consistent with the disparate desires of the family’s children and adults
- Portions and preparations more aligned with smaller families (See Chart 8.)

## CHART 8: HELP SOUGHT FROM FOOD STORES FOR FAMILY DINNERS



FMI Shopping for Health, 2016. Q1013.<sup>4</sup> Which improvements, if any, would you like to see your primary food store implement to assist you with the dinners you have with your family? N=190 primary shopper parents.

New product and service offerings either initiated or supported by food retailers have ventured into this white space, introducing an ever-deeper variety of **packaged or value-added fresh produce, meal kits, modular mix-and-match meal components, and fresh-prepared meals in both family and single-serving sizes**. Retailers have moved beyond recipe distribution to curating in-store merchandising **displays with a mix of fresh and packaged categories** to inspire occasion-motivated family shoppers.<sup>5</sup> A **dedicated informational campaign** during last year's National Family Meals Month™ was positively received, especially by shoppers with children, who tended to appreciate its reinforcement of family efforts already underway to eat together at home.<sup>26</sup>

A more comprehensive strategy to elevate the number of family meals should consider the full range of today's potential eating families and all meal occasions, as well as the full set of conditions that enable family meals to happen. Family meals require a **COORDINATION in TIME AND PLACE of EATERS**, their **APPETITES**, and **FOOD** ready to eat and aligned with these appetites. (See figure below.)

Challenges and opportunities to solve these arise from each area of coordination and vary by life stage. A common objective among home chefs is to align FOOD components so that meals are ready to eat when eaters are ready to eat them. This requires planning of meals, management of food inventory, and orchestration of food preparation and serving. To align APPETITES, parents manage their children through pre-dinner hunger and snacking, and adult partners try to synchronize their own bodily rhythms. To align EATERS involves either the daily dance of commuting and carpooling, or typically more sporadic efforts to connect for dinner dates with friends or family who live apart.

#### CONDITIONS NEEDED TOGETHER FOR FAMILY MEALS



Based on findings in this white paper, The Hartman Group suggests that food retailers can cultivate a greater cultural environment for family dining. Some specific directions to encourage family meals include:

- **FRIENDS WITH NUTRIENTS:** How can we encourage young adults living alone to connect with each other for home-cooked dinners? Can shared cooking experiences inspire sufficient interest to bring friends together? Are their social frictions to resolve, such as stigma around intimacy or ambiguity about who would host and who would pay? Can food retailers play a role in promoting home-cooked dinners among friends as a consistent, routinized behavior, e.g., “Friendly Fridays”?
- **DUAL INCOMES, DUELING SCHEDULES:** How can we work together to elevate the sanctity of dinnertime in American culture? Can we vary the food store experience to acknowledge and honor the dinner hour? Even as food retailers offer fresh-prepared meals to meet the needs of hard-working guests with intractable schedules, can we reserve some options for narrower windows of time? What else can food retailers do to inspire their guests to carve out time to eat together?
- **THE LONG HELLO:** As long as divergent schedules and appetites persist, how can food stores extend the length of time that a given family spends enjoying dinner? Can appetizers please family members who are hungry before meals? Can food stores help Americans fully accept room-temperature dinner entrees that allow latecomers to join in without missing a beat?
- **EARLY TO RISE:** Americans already sold on the value of social eating may be persuaded to shift some of their efforts to breakfast or lunch. What would encourage family members to join each other to enjoy food together on a weekday morning? Is it about pausing? Waking up earlier? The innovation or reintroduction of convenient family-style morning entrees? Or simply offering imagery to clarify the ideal, a vision for what an everyday family breakfast can look like?

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Established in 1996, the **Food Marketing Institute Foundation** seeks to ensure continued quality and efficiency in the food retailing system and is operated for charitable, educational, and scientific purposes. To help support the role of food retailing, the FMI Foundation focuses on research and education in the areas of food safety, nutrition, and health.



Created in 2015 by the Food Marketing Institute (FMI) Foundation on behalf of the nation's food retailers, **National Family Meals Month™** (NFMM) encourages families to enjoy one more meal at home each week. Family meals eaten at home strengthen the family's social fabric and promote healthier eating. With the proven benefits of combating obesity and deterring unhealthy behaviors such as substance abuse, family meals contribute to a healthier community and nation. In addition, the FMI Foundation's promotion of NFMM encourages food retailers, suppliers and community collaborators to provide solutions for more family meals at home.



Since 1989, **The Hartman Group, Inc.** has been immersed in the study of American food and beverage culture, using ethnographic observation, quantitative tracking surveys and deep study of trends to understand the subtle complexities of consumer and shopper behaviors.