

The New York Times

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August 24, 2012

Employing Dietitians Pays Off for Supermarkets

By **STEPHANIE STROM**

MOLINE, Ill. — Lois E. Florence recently left her doctor's office with a diagnosis of [colitis](#), an intestinal disorder, and a complicated set of instructions for changing her [diet](#).

After several setbacks she had a chance conversation with the pharmacist at her local Hy-Vee grocery store here that changed everything.

He referred her to the store's dietitian, Dawn Blocklinger, and on a recent sunny morning, the two of them spent almost an hour compiling a list of the foods Mrs. Florence, 79, could eat and alternatives for the ones she couldn't, like rye bread to replace wheat and Tofutti instead of [ice cream](#).

Then they went shopping.

Hy-Vee is the only grocery chain in the country that posts a registered dietitian in almost every one of its 235 stores. In rural areas, some of its more than 190 dietitians serve a cluster of stores.

That puts it at the forefront of a phenomenon sweeping the grocery business as it tries both to capitalize on growing consumer awareness of the role food plays in health and wellness and to find new ways to fend off competition from specialty markets like Whole Foods and big-box stores like Walmart.

"There's been an explosion of interest in having a dietitian among grocery store retailers in the last three or four years," said Annette Maggi, chairwoman of the supermarket subgroup of the food and culinary professionals practice group at the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and a consultant to the retail and food manufacturing industries.

The supermarket subgroup now has more than 400 members and its numbers are rising, Ms. Maggi said. Jane Andrews at Wegman is widely regarded as the grande dame of supermarket dietitians, becoming the first dietitian on its staff in 1988 and now supervising a team of six. Other regional chains like Meijer, Giant Eagle, Bashas' and H-E-B also have them, and bigger

grocery stores are getting involved, too.

Kroger, which already has dietitians on staff, is adding more of them to its King Soopers chain in the West.

At Meijer, a regional supermarket chain in the Midwest, the five dietitians do about 100 events a quarter, 80 to 85 appearances at community events, health assessments with company employees, in-store cooking demonstrations and educational programs on health subjects like [diabetes](#) and heart disease.

They also are responsible for maintaining pages on the company Web site and producing a variety of pamphlets and booklets.

“Like almost all of us, I started out in a hospital, but I switched because I wanted to talk to people about what they were eating before they got sick,” said Shari Steinbach, the lead dietitian at Meijer.

Ms. Steinbach has been a grocery store dietitian for 24 years, and she said she had never seen interest in the position so high. “I think retailers are starting to see our value,” she said. “They can document increased sales of healthier items, the e-mails from shoppers wanting appointments, the invitations from manufacturers wanting us to come to their conferences.”

Andy McCann, senior vice president for retail health at Hy-Vee, said he got about three or four calls and e-mails each week from other grocery store operators wanting to know more about Hy-Vee’s dietitians.

One of the most frequent questions callers have is how Hy-Vee calculates its financial return on its investment in dietitians. “We have store directors in eight states who have looked at it and say they can’t afford not to have a dietitian in their stores,” Mr. McCann said. “It’s very difficult to calculate a return on investment, but when you look at day to day what the dietitians do, it’s easy to see how they’re valuable.”

At Hy-Vee, dietitians offer in-store consultations and store tours with customers, hold cooking classes, assemble take-home meals, take biometric screenings, do presentations in schools, businesses and civic events, work with merchandisers, help set up community gardens, assess products for nutritional value and a variety of other things.

They also explain the NuVal system, a nutritional scoring system done by independent nutritionists and medical experts that more and more retailers, including Hy-Vee, are deploying to help consumers assess products.

The dietitian's role is expanding, said Phil Lempert, a grocery industry expert and author of the blog Supermarket Guru. "The field of nutrition is getting more and more complicated," Mr. Lempert said. "Merchants used to buy on price and promotion, but you can't buy that way any more with all the product claims. You need someone around who understands whether products can really deliver, whether they're safe."

He has set up a new organization, the Retail Dietitians Business Alliance, that will offer its members a weekly newsletter with tips on merchandising, webinars about how to demonstrate the value of a dietitian in a retail setting, and workshops at gatherings like Expo West in March and the Food Marketing Institute's Health and Wellness Conference.

Recently, Kristen Decker, the dietitian at the Utica Ridge Hy-Vee in Davenport, Iowa, just across the Mississippi River from Moline, spent her morning preparing Fast Fit Meals, a program that supplies three meals and two snacks a day totaling 1,200 to 1,500 calories to cover five days a week. Shoppers pay \$75 for a week and pick up the food and instructions for preparing it each day on a specific day of the week.

"We have four weeks of menus, and they never eat the same thing twice during that period," Ms. Decker said. "There is a mix of fresh, frozen and dry, and if you don't like fish or broccoli, we'll find a substitute."

Six shoppers were stopping by that evening to pick up meals, but Ms. Decker said that number would double after the summer break.

"Customers don't have a lot of time, or they don't know what to look for," she said. "The claims on the front of the packaging aren't always about nutrition, or sometimes they just don't know what's important. I had a customer, for instance, ask about whether he should be more concerned about sugar or fat."

Megan Leahy, the deli manager at the Hy-Vee in Rock Island, Ill., knows to watch the fats she eats. Ms. Leahy has Chrissy Watters, the dietitian in her store, monitor her cholesterol, heart rate, weight and other biometrics, which entitles her to a discount on her insurance.

"Your glucose is perfect," Ms. Watters told her. "You're still working on your waist circumference."

She recommended more aerobic activity, eating more fish and using canola oil.

Ms. Leahy has started running, and she said Ms. Watters had given her some ideas for foods lower in cholesterol, including a spinach dip made with yogurt. But she wrinkled her nose at the mention of fish, which all of the dietitians said was a hard sell. "I'm like a 5-year-old when

it comes to trying new food,” Ms. Leahy said.

While Ms. Watters was giving a tour of the store, a call came in from Chris Carlson, a shopper whom she had advised. Mr. Carlson had come to her after having a blood test showing his **triglycerides** were at 880 and his **total cholesterol** was at 332.

“I knew I needed to make significant changes, and I had contacted various groups, but they all wanted me to pay a lot of money to do their programs,” Mr. Carlson said.

His wife had consulted with a Hy-Vee dietitian when her mother found out she was gluten intolerant, and she suggested he make an appointment with Ms. Watters. “She gave use some ideas about how to change our diets with different meats and get off the sugar and walked us through the store,” Mr. Carlson said.

He called that day, two months later, because he had been to the doctor and his cholesterol had dropped to 170 and he had lost 27 pounds. “As someone whose business is sales, I can see how having someone like Chrissy is good for Hy-Vee,” Mr. Carlson said.