

# Expert support for HEALTHY CHOICES

It's what's on the inside (of your store) that counts.

By Hailey Settineri.

In August, *Retail World* looked at the role of supermarkets in shaping the health of their customers. This month, we look at how retailers are integrating health – and health practitioners – into their business.

Accredited Practising Dietitian Miranda Blake is an Australian Research Council DECRA (Discovery Early Career Researcher Award) fellow from the Institute for Health Transformation (IHT) at Deakin University. She also leads a research program within the National Health and Medical Research Council Centre of Research Excellence in Food Retail Environments for Health (RE-FRESH) network of researchers and policy makers. Her team's work focuses on the implementation of healthy food retail initiatives and policies, with a particular interest in evaluating and leveraging diverse stakeholder perspectives.

Dr Blake says grocery retailers are the main places Australians buy their foods, thereby playing a critical role in supporting the health of Australians by creating environments that promote healthier food and drink choices.

"Retailers can achieve this by using merchandising techniques to make healthier options more appealing than less healthy ones," she said. "UNICEF provides a practical guide to assist retailers in making these changes, outlining evidence-based actions in areas such as corporate strategy, product development and labelling, product availability and placement [including at checkouts], and promotional activities [including catalogues and in-store signage]."

As it currently stands, she says, much more substantial action is needed across the supermarket sector to ensure that the places Australians buy their food support good health. Dr Blake cites the latest 'Inside our Supermarkets' report from the IHT's Global Centre for



Preventive Health and Nutrition, released in April, which shows that while there have been some positive developments over the past five years – such as supermarkets voluntarily committing to adopt the Health Star Rating for their own-brand products and Woolworths making initial commitments to improve the healthiness of checkout offerings – there remain substantial gaps.

"The four largest supermarkets have very few policies aimed at improving the affordability of healthier foods and have taken limited action to reduce heavy discounts on unhealthy options," Dr Blake said.

"We don't currently have evidence on how well smaller grocery retailers are supporting customers' health in their stores."

## Integrating dietitians

Retailers can address health in their stores in many ways. Some examples were discussed in *Retail World's* August issue. A key step in the journey is sourcing expertise. This is where partnering with a qualified dietitian can help.

"Dietitians can help retailers navigate food fads and health-washing, identifying genuinely healthy options to improve product range," Dr Blake said.

"They can create opportunities for promoting healthy choices to customers, such as developing healthy recipes and fact-checking marketing claims."

Additionally, dietitians can assist in formulating healthy policies, strategic plans, and advising on step-by-step changes.



The Eat Well @ IGA initiative in five stores in Bendigo, Victoria involved collaboration between dietitians, local councils, researchers, and store managers and owners. The 12-month initiative featured ‘healthy’ trolley and basket signage, local promotions, and shelf tags and wobblers highlighting the healthiest foods.

“Remarkably, 97 per cent of [surveyed] customers agreed the program should continue,” Dr Blake said. “Store staff and managers were positive about its community benefits and the opportunity to differentiate themselves from competitors. The Eat Well @ IGA program has since been adapted in the Ballarat and Latrobe regions of Victoria.”

Similarly, RE-FRESH’s ‘Healthy Stores 2020’ initiative involved community partners, store owners and retailers in remote stores in the Northern Territory and North Queensland.

“This initiative included actions such as ‘high sugar’ food and drink signage, display and prominence, and increasing the promotion of healthier options,” Dr Blake said. “Over three months, the stores that implemented these healthy changes sold 1.8 tonnes less sugar, with no negative impact on business outcomes.”

**Outback initiatives**

Health and nutrition is a key focus for Outback Stores, which works with Indigenous communities to ensure a nutritious, affordable and quality food supply in remote areas of Australia.

“Outback Stores encourages healthier purchases by promoting good nutrition and providing affordable pricing, while not restricting individual choice,” Outback Stores Health and Nutrition Manager Anna Murison said. “Success is measured by reduced sales of sugary drinks and tobacco while increasing the sale of water, fruit and vegetables.”

In 2023, Outback Stores sold 560 tonnes of fresh fruit and vegetables to remote communities, claiming to have averted the consumption of 6.9 tonnes or sugar through sugary drinks.

Reducing the consumption of sugary drinks is an ongoing project for Outback Stores. Remote Northern Territory communities such as Engawala, Santa Teresa, Ali Curung, and Urapunga have all reported significant sugar-consumption reduction following a range of measures implemented by store directors. Between 2012 and 2022, the proportion of full-sugar drinks across stores serviced by Outback Stores

was claimed to have been reduced by 34 per cent. In the same period, the proportion of water sold increased by 131 per cent and that of sugar-free drinks increased by 89 per cent.

Outback Stores has an in-house nutrition team that works with community store directors to support the implementation of key nutrition strategies targeted at improving the health of their communities. It also partners with various stakeholders, such as Monash and Flinders Universities, hosting students studying nutrition and dietetics for their Community and Public Health Nutrition Placement.

“These placements continue to focus on real-time internal data, allowing students to provide feedback to the business on topics that encompass our strong social values,” Ms Murison said. “We take pride in offering a unique placement experience where students work with First Nations peoples in a remote retail setting to improve health outcomes in remote communities. We look forward to continuing these placements and helping future generations to understand the powerful impact that retail environments have on population health across remote communities.”

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Outback Stores operates in unique, complex and remote environments, which brings significant challenges, with accessibility being one of the significant external challenges.

On the health front, these Indigenous communities experience a prevalence of chronic issues, such as diabetes, rheumatic heart disease and cardiovascular disease.

“Working in a cross-cultural environment with diverse values, obligations and priorities can present many challenges,” Ms Murison said. “Communities have comparatively small, transient populations due to seasonal movement and cultural obligations.”

The company works closely with communities to forge strong long-term relationships built on trust, respect and integrity. Contemporary retail practice is adapted to incorporate and embrace Aboriginal culture and values.

“We’re focused on improving affordability of healthy food, with fruit and vegetable prices kept as close as possible to major metropolitan retailers, and with a pricing policy that contains mechanisms to keep healthy product prices as low as possible,” Ms Murison said.

Outback Stores’ advice to other retailers looking to improve the health of their communities is to consider working with community leaders to craft a nutrition policy that reflects the needs and concerns of their customers.

“Liaise with wholesalers and suppliers to negotiate pricing on healthier products,” Ms Murison added. “And use store sales data to inform decisions.”

### Supporting ‘healthy living’

Ritchies operates stores across Victoria, NSW and Queensland. The health concerns of the various communities it serves are fairly consistent, says Ritchies Stores National Merchandise General Manager Jarrod Swaine.

“Everyone would like to be a little healthier, a little leaner, a little stronger with less aches and pains and most of all get a good night’s sleep,” he said. “Whether they’re willing to change habits of spending and lifestyle to achieve these goals is the question.”

Ritchies Stores works to support the health needs of its customers through its range.



“We try to cover all budgets from our extensive ‘healthy living’ range to our ‘better for you’ sections covering the more mainstream offers,” Mr Swaine said. “These categories cover a wide range of organic, gluten free, vegan/vegetarian, FODMAP, and lactose free products, covering most intolerances.”

Ritchies has also worked extensively with a nutritionist and naturopath to establish its range and continues to work with suppliers to keep up with trends and offers coming to market.

“We’ve created recipes in the past to help customers navigate the best ingredients and brands and the best way to use them in the kitchen,” Mr Swaine said. “We’ll start a new program in the new year to complement our online and social content.”

His advice to other retailers looking to help improve the health of their communities is to listen to their customers, train their staff, share what they have to offer and make their store a destination.

“If you have a health range, keep it prominent in-store – near your fresh section is best – and have a mix of product range,” he said.

“If you don’t have room for a full offer, at least look at healthy snacking and confectionery, which is an easy grab-and-go purchase – especially if paired with lifestyle beverages, for example prebiotics, protein-plus, health shots, etc.”

Mr Swaine says the health food category has the benefit of reaching across all age groups.

“Just remember that while millennials are making healthy, natural foods a top priority, Gen Z and Gen Alpha are changing the ways consumers gather information about food and how they source food products and ingredients. And you need to be online to reach this generation.”

### Finding support

Dr Blake says promoting healthy options can serve as a point of difference for businesses.

“Retailer practices and policies that care for customers’ health and wellbeing can be reflected in branding to benefit both customers and retailers,” she said.

Retailers can seek support from organisations such as the National Nutrition Foundation and Nutrition Australia, which assist in identifying how healthy products are, and provide recommendations on marketing and promotion.

Healthy Grocers Community of Practice events held by VicHealth feature presentations by and discussions relating to supermarkets from a health and sustainability perspective.

The George Institute’s FoodSwitch program can support food companies to benchmark the healthiness of their product portfolios against competitors and government targets.

Market research indicates that customers are increasingly seeking healthy options, says Dr Blake: “The time for retailers to act is now!”