

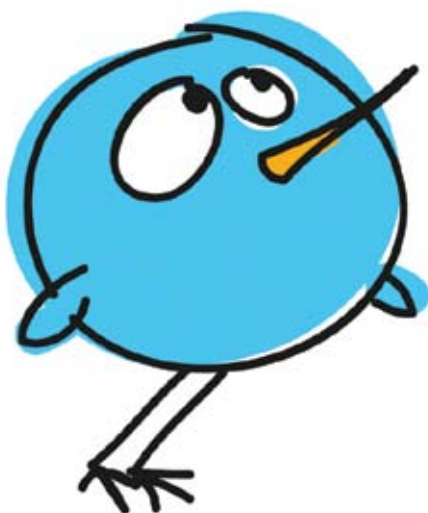
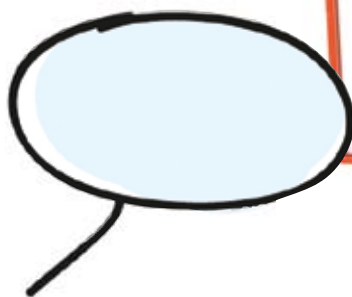


Trendspoo

BY JERRY SOVERINSKY

Tw

@collegestudents roam the #nacsshow, sending tweets, twitpics and retweets about trends on the expo.



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Numbering more than 16 million nationwide and spending more than \$200 billion each year, it's no wonder the 18- to 24-year-old college student demographic is coveted by marketers. Most in this age group begin living apart from their parents for the first time, making independent purchasing decisions that often lead to long-term brand loyalty.

But connecting and engaging with this demographic is often an elusive task. No matter the sophistication of a marketer's social media execution, the 18- to 24-year-old consumer is often steps ahead, fully versed in the next digital platform — with stores and brands left to play catch-up.

With an eye toward instructing both retailers and brands how to successfully target the desirable 18 to 24s, NACS launched its first-ever Trendspotters TweetUp event at the NACS Show this past October, an opportunity for attendees to learn first-hand which products in the expo resonated most among young adults, and the elements that most influence their purchasing habits.

"It's a very important target group for

[NACS members]; 18- to 24-year-olds represent one of the highest spending demographics for convenience store retailers," said Stephanie Robert, NACS director of event marketing and communications, who helped develop the program. "If retailers can better understand the types of products that group seeks and how to communicate with the demographic 'in their terms,' it most likely will stimulate sales."

#ExpoTweets

Learning how to communicate with the segment was a major component of the event, with college student participants sending tweets to their Twitter followers that chronicled their spontaneous reaction to the Show and its products, before heading to the NACS Booth

where they reported their findings in a live Q&A format.

“The holy grail of slushies @drinkarizona #NACS,” tweeted one of the students from the expo, who “fell in love” with the Arizona Tea machine that made frozen versions of the popular drink. Indeed, she snapped a photo with her smartphone, integrating the link within her posting for all 158 of her Twitter followers to read — and then comment on.

“Hey Roshi — where did u find an Arizona slushie machine?! I need it! Omg...” tweeted one of her followers, minutes after the photo was distributed.

When the students returned to the NACS Booth, the Twitter exchanges continued — this time by Show attendees — as three of the students served as panelists and responded to questions posed by moderator James Andrews, founder of the social media communications agency Social People.

“#NACSShow trendspotters like easy fast products they can grab on the go for breakfast. Breakfast bars are great!!!” tweeted one attendee, seconds after one

of the students expressed limited time each morning to prepare a traditional breakfast.

“Trendspotters: Packaging technology is BIG! #nacsshow” tweeted another, after a student said attractive and innovative packaging was likely to prompt him to try a new product.

The communications stream was not lost on exhibitors, who followed the reactions closely — and to which they tweeted their own comments.

“We love reading your tidbits of info about #trendspotters and what they look for at the #NACSShow!” tweeted a food company executive.

#TweetLogistics

Developed as a joint project with the other NACS — the National Association of *College Stores* (henceforth NACS2, for clarity) — the NACS-NACS2 partnership was designed to be instructive for both organizations.

“We have approximately 3,100 store members and another 1,000 associate members [suppliers], so there is strong interest in finding out what products

appeal to the 18-24 group,” said Hugh Easley, vice president of meetings & expositions for NACS2. “For us, we knew the program would be good for our stores.

Finding the college participants was easy — NACS2’s internal research department sent out a recruitment posting, introducing the program while offering selected participants a \$100 stipend.

The \$100 fee was funded equally by NACS and NACS2, and after an informal morning training session, 32 participants spent six hours walking the expo, meeting with exhibitors, sampling products, sharing their finds with other participants, and of course, tweeting their reactions, beginning with their excitement at being singled out to participate in the high-profile event.

“I am cooler than you cuz im at the #NACSSHOW ... Vip status!” tweeted one, whose enthusiasm was tempered one, whose enthusiasm was tempered hours later after she discovered firsthand the massive scope of the Show.

“i doubt any of us have the energy to stop by every single booth. we’re only half way done... crazyyy! #nacsshow!”

And an hour or so later, she seemed to have realized that her \$100 fee was far from easy money: “Its about that time. Super tired #NACSSHOW,” she remarked.

The students broke up their six-hour commitment with a group lunch, discussing their findings with fellow participants and a NACS-NACS2 project leader. After that, it was back to the expo, where they schmoozed with sales reps while munching their way through beef jerky, jelly beans and potato chips. And of course, some even came face-to-face with super cool celebrities.

“Tony is more than good, he is great! #NACSSHOW,” tweeted a student, linking to a photo that showed her posing with Frosted Flakes icon Tony the Tiger.



College students downloaded their opinions about interesting products they saw at the NACS Show expo.

#TweetFeedback

The Q&A session provided some surprising insights, at least for this writer whose 20-year-old nephew is a fan of everything battered, loaded with high fructose corn syrup and garnished with pepperoni.

"Most [students] are health conscious today," said participant Joy Callaway, who said she lost 30 pounds this past summer.

"We don't have time to go to the gym and workout because we study most of the time, so we need lower calorie food," remarked Pakistani Amen Sardar, who attends school in Chicago.

Other product elements that appealed to the students included packaging ("I liked the packaging of one of the energy drinks; it was fun, it looked like it would work," Callaway said), price point (\$3 and under is key, Sardar said) and grab-and-go, especially important during the morning daypart where the students said time is tight.

As for their shopping habits, Walmart, Target and 7-Eleven were cited as popular destinations, with QSRs treaded lightly. And perhaps most instructive for NACS members, all of the panelists said they were unlikely to purchase prepared food from gas stations, with Chicagoan Tony Pitman saying he perceived prepared foods at gas stations as lacking freshness.

#TweetingSummary

The event probed deeper than spontaneous 140-character impressions of food and drink as well as post-Show recollections from a sample of three. Indeed, the event was carefully scripted to provide detailed consumer insights from all 32 participants, with each student roaming the expo with a 20-page "Prioritization and Questionnaire" that had them rank from 1 to 5 their favorite items in the candy, salty snacks, non-alcohol beverage and foodservice cate-

gories, while responding to the following:

- Have you tried this product before today?
- What did you like about this product?
- Is there anything you would change about this product if you could?
- What are the characteristics of a person who would buy this product?

NACS and NACS2 will review the answers carefully, sharing the information with their respective members, where best practices will no doubt be offered. (Stay tuned to the *NACS Daily* and *NACS Magazine* for results.) And as for reaching out to college students in the future, the trend is definitely heading digital.


"These kids said the best way to reach them is digital," Robert said, "and we need to focus on social media, digital marketing and mobile marketing."

The digital focus for NACS is well underway. Indeed, if you missed any of the

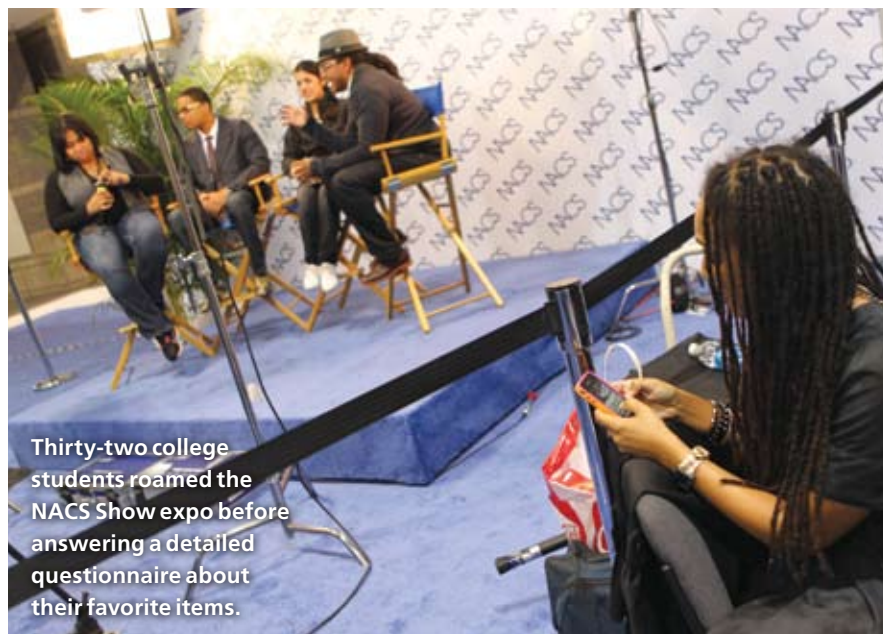
I am cooler than
you cuz im at the
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Vip status!



trendspotters action and want more than what you see here in print, visit nacsonline.com (which includes video from the TweetUp's Q&A), the NACS Mobile App, as well as NACS Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter pages. That is, if you forgot to scan one of the QR codes at the NACS Show.

NACS is plugged in. Are you? 

Jerry Soverinsky is a NACS Magazine and NACS Daily contributing writer.



Thirty-two college students roamed the NACS Show expo before answering a detailed questionnaire about their favorite items.