

Food Processing & COVID-19: An Inside Look

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The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the food processing industry. With government-mandated shutdowns, stay-at-home advisories, and quarantine orders, consumers felt a heightened level of panic around grocery availability, and an increased wariness around public outings, shopping, and dining. The drastic shift in consumer behaviors and government regulations forced food processors to adapt their products and services to meet changing consumer demands. We recently spoke with North Coast Seafoods to get an inside look at the challenges they faced during the pandemic, how they responded to the shifts in consumer behavior, and the strategies they implemented to prevail in a dramatically different industry ecosystem.

North Coast Seafoods

North Coast Seafoods is a third-generation family-owned seafood processor based in Boston, Massachusetts. They control every part of the process, from hook to delivery, to provide the freshest seafood to their customers.

Responding to Challenges Faced During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Challenge

Prior to the pandemic, the majority of all seafood was consumed at restaurants. Many consumers were hesitant to prepare seafood at home given the perceived complexity of buying and preparing it:

- How do I cook it?
- How do I know it's fresh or the right quality?
- How much should I buy?
- Will it make my kitchen smell?

Then, in the blink of an eye, COVID-19 changed everything.

As restaurants were forced to close and consumers adhered to quarantine orders, the industry had to quickly adapt in order to educate consumers and overcome consumer hesitancy to prepare fish at home.

The Solution

North Coast's primary customers are grocery stores, club stores, schools, and restaurants. While the grocery stores and club stores showed significant demand from panicked buyers stocking up on their frozen tray pack products, the restaurant and school business presented their own set of challenges. North Coast Seafoods used this change in consumer behavior as an opportunity to reach their customers directly. North Coast created [an online shopping platform](#) to sell their Boat-to-Plate services to the general public. With this new e-commerce website, customers can order fresh seafood from the comfort and safety of their own homes. Their fresh seafood is caught, frozen, cut, packaged, and delivered to your door in less than 48 hours (hence their tagline, "Boat-to-Plate in 48").

In order to help educate consumers, they've also created a [YouTube channel](#) that allows customers to track their order and trace it directly back to the fishermen or boat that harvested their meal.

As the pandemic continued and consumers began to embrace their kitchen, North Coast Seafoods has continued to adapt. They've created a seafood line, *Chef's Catch Kitchen*, with the same quality and ingredients found in a restaurant. The line will be launched online nationally this summer and is a single-serving seafood entrée that's baked in the oven from frozen. The North Coast Seafoods online menu will include five to six different entrées that are seasonally adjusted two to three times per year, just like a restaurant. These ready-to-cook meals (such as salmon and shrimp burgers, stuffed haddock, coconut crusted fish, and crab cakes) will allow customers to experience fresh, quality seafood entrées without the hassle.

As we detailed in [our previous article](#), products labeled as *pre-cooked*, *ready-made*, or *stovetop-ready* gained popularity during COVID-19—with 42% of Americans buying more food products with these labels. North Coast adopted this trend and created product packaging to highlight the ease of cooking packaged seafood at home.

Conclusion

North Coast Seafoods quickly recognized the evolving needs of their customers as a result of the pandemic. As restaurants closed, and the demand was focused in the grocery and club store business, the opportunity presented to reach their customers (as well as new geographies) directly. An entirely revamped e-commerce platform and service now encourages customers to buy seafood by making them more comfortable to prepare it at home, and updated products, advertisement, and packaging coincides with the changing needs of individuals during this turbulent time. North Coast capitalized on their changing consumer demands and developed new strategies to address their customers' needs. In fact, [some reports](#) are stating that Americans are cooking more seafood than ever!