

Rethinking Flatware

Open-stock assortments are attracting retail attention across all channels

By Allison Zisko



FLATWARE TENDS TO BE THE TABLETOP CATEGORY THAT REGISTERING BRIDES choose last and consumers in general think about least. But the growing strength and sophistication of open stock flatware programs at retail has put the flatware business in a new, more desirable light.

Unlike dinnerware and glassware, flatware has typically been confined to five-piece place settings or expanded set configurations. Open stock flatware has long been offered at mass merchants, but Bed Bath & Beyond and a handful of specialty retailers began offering open stock flatware a few years ago, and department stores are beginning to get into the act, vendors said.

"We noticed a trend with more open stock flatware available to consumers in various forms," said Grace Saari, brand marketing director at Gibson. "Offering open stock allows the customer to buy as many pieces as they want, in the patterns they want."

That power of choice is what drives the open-stock business, said Hildy Abrams, president of Gourmet Settings. "It gives her [the consumer] the ability to create her own flatware destiny," she said. Sometimes a consumer wants more teaspoons but doesn't want to buy an entire set of flatware, or just wants to buy forks for a dinner party, or is a college student who doesn't need a 20-piece set. "It's a choice business, a fussy business," Abrams said. "It's a 'I want what I want when I want it' business."

"It's an area that's growing, with more retailers adding space for open stock," said Suso Balanza, vice president of sales and marketing at Hampton Forge. "It's not limited to basic items. Part of what is making it strong is the addition of entertaining items like spreaders and cocktail forks."

Patterns are simple enough to complement whatever the consumer has at home. "Usually we try to have a program that is as mainstream as possible, in terms of style," Balanza said.

The impulsivity of open-stock programs—items typically retail for \$1 or \$2 apiece—can add to their appeal. "The price points are accessible and it turns flatware from a considered purchase to an impulse item," said Ross Patterson, business director—tabletop for Robinson Home Products, which manufactures licensed goods for Oneida. Robinson Home experimented with a "true" open stock program a few years ago with its Chef's Table brand, but it received a poor response from retailers who were concerned about the low individual ticket price, the greater possibility of theft and maintenance issues, Patterson said. So it switched to a carded program, offering sets of six items—anything from a typical five-piece place setting is available, along with iced teaspoons, spreaders and a salad set—for \$9.99 retail. The idea, according to Patterson, was "let's make this easier to merchandise and bring the ticket up."

Quality is not compromised in open-stock offerings, according to vendors, who said they offer the same pieces in open stock that are ordinarily configured in their boxed sets. "Our model is not to make this a cheap, lower-end product," Patterson said. "It's not a trade down."

Retailers seem to have overcome their initial reticence about open stock and are better responding to today's consumer lifestyles. Proper merchandising is the key to a successful open

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Above: Gibson introduced a new fixture for its open-stock flatware that can work with any pattern and fit into a number of retail settings. gibsonhome.com

Left: Robinson Home Products has opted for six-piece carded sets in the Oneida brand. robinsonhome.com

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stock flatware program, vendors agreed.

At the New York Tabletop Show in October, Gibson launched a new fixturing program for its open-stock flatware. It is a partitioned white wood box, 20-by-10 inches, that resembles a flatware drawer. A four-color header card shows multiple flatware pieces. When a retailer places a \$300 minimum order, the fixture comes free.

Although Gibson is launching the fixture with the pattern Mulholland, the program is designed to accommodate any number of patterns down the road, Saari said. And the fixture itself is compact enough to work in any retail setting. "It's taking that big store approach to smaller stores with an easy-to-work-with footprint," Saari said.

Lifetime Brands, which offers open stock flatware in all its flatware brands, has developed or been asked to develop special fixturing for open stock flatware, according to Scott Bial, president, Wallace division, Lifetime Brands. Hampton Forge offers peg-able items that can be incorporated with an existing rack or shelving unit, as well as bins that can be placed on shelves. It also offers gift set presentations (usually sets of four items) in its Argent brand for department stores.

The growing popularity of open stock flatware has encouraged vendors to venture into new distribution channels. "We sell open stock flatware to multiple channels of distribution, from grocery to department stores, and find that these programs are becoming more important to all retailers," Bial said.

Patterson believes open stock has a "broad reach." The company considers high-end grocery stores a growth opportunity. Open stock flatware "has opened new doors for us while adding on to our current business," he said.

Balanza sees it as a growing part of the flatware category. "We are taking that growing business and looking for the next way to build, with more trend- and fashion-focused pieces," he said. He hopes that in time retailers will seek out open stock flatware as a point of differentiation and design, "to keep the category exciting." ■