

AI in Foodservice: From Experimentation to Competitive Advantage

Proposed 2027 Research Program #12742

Introduction

Artificial intelligence is moving quickly from experimentation into everyday foodservice decision-making. Operators and other industry stakeholders are evaluating AI for forecasting, purchasing, menu development, labor deployment, marketing, customer insights, training, and business planning. Adoption, however, is uneven. Some organizations are already integrating AI into existing systems and workflows, while others remain uncertain about the business case, data quality, employee readiness, security, and the appropriate role of human judgment.

For foodservice manufacturers, the implications extend beyond internal productivity. AI may change how customers discover products, evaluate suppliers, develop menus, forecast demand, and communicate their needs. This study will identify where AI is creating measurable value, where expectations exceed current capabilities, and how manufacturers can use AI to strengthen customer understanding, innovation, sales, and go-to-market strategies.

This proposal is a working research framework that will be refined with study sponsors before fieldwork begins.

Overall Objectives

- Measure current AI awareness, adoption, usage, and investment across commercial and noncommercial foodservice.
- Identify the AI applications producing the greatest operational and commercial value—and those that remain largely experimental.
- Understand barriers involving data, integration, cost, trust, security, governance, talent, and organizational readiness.
- Examine how AI is changing menu development, purchasing, supplier evaluation, forecasting, labor management, marketing, and customer engagement.
- Determine how manufacturers can use AI to improve innovation, sales effectiveness, customer support, and strategic decision-making.
- Provide sponsors with a practical framework for prioritizing AI opportunities and avoiding investments that lack a clear business case.

Proposed Key Issues

To be refined with sponsor input during kickoff.

Adoption, Readiness and Investment

- How familiar are foodservice leaders with the capabilities and limitations of generative, predictive, and embedded AI tools?
- Which organizations are actively using AI, piloting applications, planning investments, or remaining on the sidelines?
- Who owns AI strategy and purchasing decisions, and which functions have the greatest influence?

- How do adoption and readiness differ by segment, organization size, operating model, and level of technological sophistication?
- What budgets, staffing, training, governance, and data capabilities are organizations committing to AI?

Use Cases and Business Value

- Where is AI being used in forecasting, purchasing, inventory management, waste reduction, pricing, menu development, and product selection?
- How are organizations applying AI to scheduling, labor deployment, training, workflow design, and operational consistency?
- What role is AI playing in marketing, loyalty, personalization, social media, customer service, and consumer insight development?
- Which applications are saving time, reducing costs, improving consistency, increasing sales, or supporting better decisions?
- How do decision-makers evaluate results, and what evidence is required before an AI pilot receives broader investment?

Data, Trust and Organizational Barriers

- What concerns exist around data privacy, cybersecurity, inaccurate outputs, bias, intellectual property, and regulatory uncertainty?
- How confident are leaders in the quality and accessibility of the data feeding AI systems?
- Where do legacy systems, fragmented data, vendor integration, or limited internal expertise constrain adoption?
- How do employees perceive AI, and where is resistance, fear, or lack of training slowing implementation?
- Which decisions require human review, and where are organizations unwilling to rely on AI-generated recommendations?

Implications for Manufacturers and Suppliers

- How might AI change the way operators research products, compare suppliers, write specifications, forecast demand, or develop menus?
- What information and digital content must manufacturers provide so their products can be accurately found, evaluated, and recommended by AI-enabled systems?
- Where can manufacturers use AI to identify opportunities, develop concepts, accelerate innovation, improve targeting, and strengthen customer-specific selling?
- What AI-enabled services, tools, data, or decision support would operators value from suppliers?
- How should manufacturers balance automation with the relationships, culinary judgment, and industry knowledge that remain essential to foodservice selling?

Future Outlook

- Which AI applications are most likely to become standard practice during the next three to five years?
- Where will AI reshape job responsibilities, organizational structures, supplier relationships, and competitive advantage?
- Which expectations are likely to be realized, and where is the market currently overestimating AI's near-term impact?
- What actions should manufacturers take now to prepare for the next stage of adoption?

Proposed Scope of Coverage

The study will examine AI from the perspective of foodservice organizations and the manufacturers, distributors, and service providers that support them. Final respondent qualifications and segment coverage will be established with sponsors.

Organizations

- Commercial operators, including chains and multi-unit organizations
- Noncommercial operators, including education, healthcare, senior living, business and industry, and recreation
- Foodservice management companies, group purchasing organizations, and distributors
- Food, beverage, equipment, packaging, and technology suppliers, where relevant

Functional Roles

- Executive leadership and strategy
- Culinary, menu development, and innovation
- Operations, labor, and training
- Procurement, supply chain, and category management
- Marketing, consumer insights, loyalty, and digital commerce
- Information technology, analytics, and data governance

Proposed Methodology

Final sample design and research instruments will be shaped with sponsor input.

Activity	Approach
Engagement initiation	Private kickoff discussions with each sponsor to review objectives, proprietary questions, internal priorities, and intended uses of the research. Sponsors will review and help refine the research instruments before launch.
Existing data review	Review of public sources, industry reporting, technology use cases, and relevant FSIP research to establish a practical baseline and inform questionnaire development.
Sponsor modules	Confidential sponsor-only questions incorporated into the survey or interview guides. Findings from these modules will be reported privately and will not be shared with other sponsors.
Quantitative research	A nationwide survey of approximately 200 qualified foodservice decision-makers across relevant commercial and noncommercial segments. Respondents will be screened for knowledge of technology, operations, procurement, marketing, culinary, or strategic decision-making.
Executive interviews	Approximately 20–25 in-depth interviews with operators and selected industry stakeholders to explore implementation experience, organizational barriers, business outcomes, governance, and the evolving relationship between operators and suppliers.
Strategic analysis	FSIP will integrate quantitative and qualitative findings into a clear assessment of adoption, priority use cases, barriers, future direction, and implications for manufacturers.

Study Deliverables

- Comprehensive PowerPoint report featuring detailed analysis, strategic implications, charts, and executive commentary.
- Assessment of AI adoption, maturity, use cases, organizational readiness, barriers, and expected future investment.

- Practical recommendations for how manufacturers can apply AI to customer understanding, innovation, sales, marketing, and strategic planning.
- Complete survey instruments, cross-tabulations, and supporting data appendix.
- Confidential reporting of each sponsor's proprietary questions.
- Sponsor presentation and discussion following internal review of the report.
- Ongoing access to FSIP for follow-up questions and interpretation at no additional cost.
- Optional post-study strategy workshop to translate the findings into company-specific priorities, initiatives, and implementation plans.

The Strategic Value to Sponsors

This research is designed to do more than document AI activity. It will help sponsors distinguish meaningful business applications from experimentation, understand how AI may change customer behavior and purchasing processes, and determine where their own investments can improve growth, productivity, and competitive positioning.

Because Foodservice IP is a strategy consultancy first, the study will connect evidence to decisions. Findings will be interpreted through the lens of go-to-market strategy, product and service innovation, customer engagement, sales effectiveness, and organizational priorities—not simply reported as a collection of survey statistics.

Foodservice IP's Experience

Foodservice IP's engagement team includes experienced foodservice strategists and researchers with backgrounds in growth strategy, market assessment, operator and consumer research, innovation, distribution, supply chain, and go-to-market planning. The research will be led by Tim Powell, Principal, who has advised foodservice manufacturers and industry organizations for more than 20 years.

Senior FSIP consultants remain involved from study design through analysis, reporting, and sponsor discussions. This continuity ensures that the research addresses practical business questions and that sponsors receive experienced interpretation of what the findings mean for their organizations.

Timing and Fees

- Anticipated project duration: approximately 12–14 weeks from initiation.
- Target kickoff: late fourth quarter 2026.
- Target delivery: first or second quarter 2027, depending on sponsor timing and final fieldwork scope.
- Pre-launch sponsors will participate in a steering process and help refine study objectives and research priorities.
- \$15,000 per sponsor for one study.
- Discounted participation: two studies for \$26,500 or three studies for \$35,000 when confirmed together.
- Private, in-person presentations are exclusive of travel expenses.

Billing Policy

- 50% upon project initiation
- Balance due upon delivery of the final report

Conclusion

AI will not affect every foodservice organization or business function at the same speed. The central strategic question is where it can create real value—and how operators, manufacturers, and other industry stakeholders

should respond. This study will provide sponsors with evidence, practical implications, and a clearer framework for deciding where to invest, how to prepare, and how to compete as AI becomes more embedded in foodservice decision-making.

Foodservice IP's shared-cost research model combines broad industry evidence with sponsor customization and ongoing strategic support. Sponsors help shape the work, receive confidential coverage of their priority questions, and retain access to the study team after delivery.

Participation Authorization

Our company confirms participation in the Foodservice IP multi-client study, AI in Foodservice: From Experimentation to Competitive Advantage #12742, in the amount of \$15,000.

Billing will follow the terms described in this proposal: 50% upon project initiation and the balance upon delivery of the final report.

Name

Title

Company

Address

Email

Signature

Date

To participate, please sign this page and return it to tpowell@foodserviceip.com. Questions may be directed to Tim Powell at 312-600-5151.