



Protein: An Emerging Opportunity

Despite increasing competition, the industry can capitalize on dairy's equity beyond calcium and bone health to meet evolving consumer needs.

By Barb O'Brien

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The dairy industry's long investment in nutrition and consumer research is paying dividends. Dairy is being recognized for its unique nutrient package and health benefits among the nutrition community. When it comes to the consumer audience, an incredible opportunity exists for the industry to promote its current and future product offerings. That's why the time is now to promote dairy's multiple nutrients and the physical and emotional benefits these products bring consumers of all ages.

The dairy industry has long leveraged its superior nutrient package, but in the past decade, non-dairy products have been starting to take ownership in this space. Dairy alternatives, juice, water and other snack foods are taking aim at dairy by leveraging a similar nutrient story. In fact, nearly half of adults now believe that dairy milk and dairy alternatives are equally nutritious, according to Emerging Diets Research, 2010, conducted by Dairy Management Inc.

Today's consumer environment presents a great opportunity for dairy, with its strong focus on health and wellness. Dairy's story can help to win the health and wellness battle — it has a superior nutrient package, science supports its value and research shows consumers believe in its benefits.

Despite increasing competition, the industry can capitalize on dairy's equity beyond calcium and bone health to meet evolving consumer needs. In fact, protein is taking center stage as a nutrient of importance, with more than half of consumers looking to include more protein in their diet (which shows slight growth over previous years), according to research findings from the NPD Group's Dieting Monitoring Service, 2008.

Consumers have high unaided awareness of the benefits of protein, in general (the only nutrient they show more knowledge of is calcium). They perceive protein as a way to help with the following:

- Build and maintain muscle
- Recovery of muscle after exercise
- Achieve sustained energy
- Suppress hunger
- Slow muscle loss with aging
- Provide an alternate protein source for those seeking meatless meals

This presents an emerging opportunity for dairy to leverage its total nutrient package with emphasis on protein content as a way to help stand ahead of the competition. But, the industry will need to help consumers connect protein and dairy first. Although research from NHANES 2003-2006 (ages 2-plus years) shows dairy already provides nearly 20% of consumers' protein consumption per day (with milk leading and cheese a close second), today's consumers give dairy credit for calcium and little else.

While dairy proteins are top-quality, fewer than one in five adults list protein as a nutrient present in cheese. The percentage is even less for milk and yogurt, as indicated in the 2009 NRF Benchmark Quantitative study.

Raising the profile of dairy's protein benefits is especially important given the health-driven meat-reducing trend. The first step is to reframe dairy's story in the marketplace by communicating the presence of multiple nutrients. Research shows that today's meat-reducing consumers do not recognize the multiple nutrient benefits of dairy as a key driver in choosing more dairy products.

To help motivate all consumers to choose more dairy, linking nutrients to specific benefits creates a powerful opportunity. The dairy industry can couple nutrition science in the benefit areas mentioned above to better ladder to how dairy can help fulfill these needs. The Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy, which is funded by the dairy checkoff, created and tested protein messages in multiple benefit areas across multiple dairy categories. These messages offer brands foundational statements that can be customized based on business goals and marketing strategies. By using core messages as a base, brands will contribute to building awareness of dairy's important protein benefits and further amplify dairy as a food group rich in nutrients to meet many health and wellness needs.

The industry can access a library of protein messages as well as consumer insight research to help guide marketing and communications of dairy protein at www.USDairy.com/hw.

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