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Outreach seeks to change physicians' views on lactose intolerance

Marketing campaign informs doctors about availability of lactose-free products

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Efforts by Dairy Management Inc. are changing physicians' attitudes and their recommendations when it comes to treating patients with lactose intolerance.

When the program began in 2008, most physicians' first line of recommendation when it came to gastrointestinal complaints was to tell patients to eliminate dairy from their diet, said Barb O'Brien, senior executive vice president for DMI and president of its Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy.

Today in America, 53 million adults report symptoms of lactose intolerance, she said.

Dairyman knew for several years that lactose intolerance and physician recommendations to patients with symptoms of the condition were an issue and committed dairy checkoff funding to address it, particularly in the medical community, she said.

The program took a multifaceted approach.

It worked on outreach to 25,000 physicians and dietitians through mailings and at medical conventions, sending the message that dairy is essential in their patients' diets and providing information on lactose-free products.

It also partnered with H.P. Hood, which licenses the Lactaid-brand supplement to help manage gastrointestinal symptoms, to make sure the product was available and in the form consumers needed it. It also offered information, coupons and trial opportunities to physicians.

DMI addressed consumer education through blogs and online sites and worked with trusted sources, such as WebMD, to make sure consumers were informed on the issue.

The efforts appear to have paid off, O'Brien said.

DMI's Milk Opportunity Study found that 28 percent of physicians surveyed in 2011 recommend avoiding dairy to their patients with symptoms of lactose intolerance, down from 47 percent in 2008.

"That a significant percentage of doctors have stopped making that recommendation is a real sign we've broken through," O'Brien said.

DMI is also excited by consumer response, she said.

Supermarket data indicate that 1.4 million additional households are purchasing lactose-free milk. Purchases of cheese and yogurt among lactose-free households also rose.

"It represents good growth for dairy. Our aspiration is that lactose-free households will consume as much milk and dairy products as conventional households," she said.

The Innovation Center is sharing its information with processors, showing them market opportunity in lactose-free products.

"This is a bright spot in the fluid milk segment. I think this is telling us this is a growing segment," she said.

The program, funded at \$3 million to \$5 million a year, is a long-term commitment that is making progress, she said.

Online

Dairy Management Inc.: www.dairycheckoff.com

WebMD: www.webmd.com

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