

CHEESE MARKET NEWS[®]

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Packaging, fresh, natural add healthy image to dairy products

By Rena Archwamety

MADISON, Wis. — Marketing toward nutrition, health and natural ingredients is becoming increasingly visible in grocery aisles. Cereals that claim to help lower cholesterol, heart-healthy mixed nuts and yogurt products with probiotics for good digestion are a few of the many products looking to catch the health-conscious consumer's attention.

"It's a very noisy environment. Companies have tried to identify specific attributes they think might be most important to consumers and most differentiating to themselves," says Brian Wansink, John Dyson Professor of Consumer Behavior at

Cornell University and author of the books *Marketing Nutrition* and *Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think*.

Many people appear to be tuned-in to these messages. According to the Hartman Group research and consulting firm, health and wellness is top-of-mind for consumers, with 92 percent saying that healthy eating is important.

The time is now for the dairy industry to share dairy's health benefits with consumers, according to Carol Blindauer, senior vice president of health and wellness at the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy, an organization managed by Dairy Management Inc. (DMI) on behalf of dairy farmers to grow sales for dairy.

"Interest in health and wellness is growing. This is a great opportunity for the dairy industry to take advantage of dairy's inherent benefits," Blindauer says. "There's a lot of buzz on health, wellness and nutrition in other categories. We need to make sure dairy products do the same."

• Beyond calcium

Consumers long have perceived milk and dairy products as a good source of calcium, but their understanding of the

other health benefits of dairy is not as strong. Blindauer cites an internal study from 2009 that asked 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 and over to list nutrients that can be found in dairy products such as cheese, milk or yogurt. More than 60 percent were aware of the calcium content in dairy products, but less than 20 percent knew that milk, cheese and yogurt are good sources of protein. The number of those who were aware of other nutrients in dairy was even lower.

"Consumers understand dairy is an important source of calcium, and calcium helps bone health," says Gregory Miller, president of the Dairy Research Institute, DMI's partner in providing technical research. "Now we have to help them understand it's so much more."

The dairy industry needs to continue to own and advertise the benefits of calcium, but also make consumers aware of dairy's other nutrients, Blindauer says.

"There is a growing consumer interest in getting more nutrients per calorie, and that milk has nine essential nutrients is new news to most consumers," she says. "A lot of other products have to fortify; we have

many of these naturally."

When the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy talks about leading with health messages in nutrition, Blindauer says the two main areas of focus that have received most interest from industry members are the protein found in dairy products and emphasizing "fresh and natural."

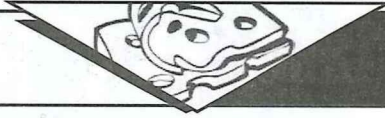
She notes 54 percent of consumers are trying to add more protein to their diets, according to the NPD Group's Dieting Monitor Service. But while people are eating more protein, most of that increase currently is not coming from dairy.

"There's an opportunity to make people aware of protein in dairy foods, and how it can meet their needs," she says, adding that this message can appeal to both the aging baby boomer population looking to slow muscle loss as they age and athletes looking to build and recover muscle. "It's a great story for milk, cheese and yogurt to continue to re-frame."

A few examples already exist in the marketplace where companies are starting to call out the protein content of dairy products, some on the

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package or point-of-sale, and others on websites. Fage Total Greek Yogurt, for example, offers a “Protein & Diet” link on its website, www.fageusa.com. This page advertises the yogurt’s high concentration of all-natural protein, up to 23 grams in each individual serving, explaining protein’s capacity for muscle-building and a source of sustained energy. Blindauer says the Greek yogurt category had done a tremendous job advertising its protein content.

“Greek yogurt is probably the hero when it comes to talking about protein in the marketplace,” she says. “We’re also seeing it in milk, cottage cheese and some cheese.”

- **Fresh cues**

In addition to people’s interest in nutrients, a general interest in food that is “fresh and natural” is increasing among consumers. The concepts of “real,” “fresh” and “natural” matter to 38 percent of consumers, and that group appears to be growing, according to the Natural Marketing Institute. Another recent study from market research and strategic consulting company HealthFocus International says 84 percent of the population thinks that knowing a food or beverage is natural makes it a little or much healthier.

“Consumers are redefining health and wellness to a broader definition,” Blindauer says. “It’s not just nutrients, but where a product comes from and how it’s made.”

From its farmstead roots to its limited ingredients, natural cheese is an ideal product to appeal to those looking

for “fresh and natural.”

In order to better understand what this growing interest in “fresh and natural” means for dairy, the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy Health and Wellness Committee did some research and identified four triggers that prompt consumers identify a products as fresh and natural. Blindauer says these cues include:

- A short list of ingredients, so it looks like people could make the product themselves.

- “This works very well with natural cheese, which starts with four basic ingredients,” Blindauer says.

- A product that is placed on the store perimeter and/or in the refrigerated section;

- Shelf life and perishability cues—a really long shelf life isn’t perceived by consumers as fresh and natural; and

- The product form and packaging. People were interested in food that was not machine-made or in a manufactured-looking shape. The more home-made, irregular shapes did better.

“All together, those cues can encourage all manufacturers to take a look at their product portfolio. There may be things they can refine, like the number of ingredients on the label or the look of the packaging,” Blindauer says.

“Protein and ‘real, fresh and natural’ are some of the newer positive messaging that provide a great opportunity,” she adds. “The backbone we need to reinforce is that there are multiple nutrients in dairy products. They are known for calcium, but the combination of calcium, protein and other nutrients gets us mileage with the new consumer, and this new news fits into their lifestyle.”

- **In-store strategies**

When it comes to advertising the healthfulness of dairy products or other foods, front-of-pack messages and the shape of the package are the best ways to do that at the point of purchase, Wansink says. Examples of front-of-pack icons include “good for you” and “better for you” claims or guiding star systems. However, companies should be aware that these up-front health messages tend to polarize consumers.

For instance, if a product says “gluten free,” some consumers may think that means it tastes really bad, while others might think it’s really good for you and perceive it as being lower in calories than it really is. Wansink suggests putting “gluten free” on an artisan cheese would end up turning off potential consumers.

“You want to make sure the focus on the front of pack is something that’s very important to your market, not something that some percentage of them will take in the wrong way,” Wansink says. “It depends on who the target market is. If it’s a super health-conscious market, it can have a very positive impact.”

When choosing the message to convey, Wansink says people are most concerned with nutrition benefits that are perceived as immediate.

“It’s not nutrition per se,” he says. “What they like are the consequences of nutrition. The consequences that appeal to most consumers aren’t that they might live three months longer if they drink this. But will it make me more full, skinnier, my complexion better. Things that are really immediate, not long-term.”

The Dairy Research Institute offers a quick-reference guide to nutrition claims for dairy products to give companies a basic understanding of nutrition claims and labeling rules. The guide, available at www.usdairy.com/dairyresearchinstitute, specifically addresses nutrition and health-related claims that represent potential opportunities for use with fluid milk, cheese and yogurt products. As regulations vary with different products and are updated, Blindauer

says each manufacturer must work with its own legal and regulatory affairs department as well.

“A message that works for one product might not for another,” Blindauer says. “Each and every time, check with your legal department.”

Wansink also notes one thing that has a very powerful subconscious impact on consumers is packaging. This can include colors, shapes or simply the fact that there is a change.

“Lighter-color packaging for lower-fat milk has had a very positive impact without people saying, ‘this tastes terrible.’ Another strategy is altering packaging so it looks different than how it used to,” Wansink says. “These things make people rate a product differently, and rate the health of the product differently.”

For example, when McDonald’s switched from milk cartons to plastic milk jugs, the change affected consumers in three different ways, Wansink says.

“One was the convenience factor. Then there was the not-gross-to-drink-out-of factor, since it was not made of paper. Third was that ‘there is something different about this, it must be better.’ Healthier, more fresh, cooler. You make one change like that, and it can move people,” he says.

- **New paradigm for health**

Miller says the Dairy Research Institute constantly is working to grow its body of research, building opportunities for health and nutrition claims from the data it has compiled.

“In nutrition, we have a lot of really great research going on,” he says. “It’s focused on metabolic health, looking at body weight, body composition, and the role of dairy foods in reducing diseases such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.”

Other recent data indicate dairy foods do not raise blood cholesterol levels as much as would be predicted based on dairy’s fat content, Miller says, adding that more research needs to be done in the future to show the benefits in consuming milkfat.

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For dairy companies wanting to advertise the health and nutrition benefits of their products, Miller suggests starting by quoting some of what the most recent Dietary Guidelines are saying about dairy foods.

"The Dietary Guidelines are saying 'dairy first,'" he says. "Even with lactose intolerance, you don't need to skip dairy. Try lactose-free milks, hard cheeses that are low in lactose, yogurts that help with digestion, or consume smaller amounts of milk with meals. This really helps consumers."

Miller adds that research is showing that positive, enabling messages about nutrient-rich foods such as dairy help consumers improve their diets.

"If they can choose more of those nutrient-rich foods, put it in their diets, it tends to displace nutrient-poorer foods," Miller says. "Cheese only contributes about 5 percent of the calories in a diet, but it also is contributing 21 percent of calcium, 11 percent of phosphorus, 9 percent of the protein, 9 percent of the vitamin A and 8 percent of the zinc. Nutritionists say 'choose the calories you eat from the company they keep.' Cheese gives quite a few nutrients per calorie."

After decades of being told to avoid things like sodium, certain fats and added sugars, Miller says the paradigm is turning toward choosing nutrient-rich foods rather than nutrient avoidance.

"Consumers are really tired of being told what not to eat," he says. "They are ready to hear a more enabling message around eating more nutrient-rich foods. They'll get it." **CMN**