



Getting Real About Dairy

BY: Mary Ellen Kuhn
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Four out of 10 consumers are interested in foods and beverages that they consider to be real, fresh, or natural, industry research shows. Marketers and researchers at the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy recently set out to confirm that this interest is indeed “real” and not merely a fad, and on Thursday, June 28, they presented some of their findings in a session titled “The Real, Fresh, Natural Foods Trend: How to Win with Consumers” held in the Special Events Pavilion on the Food Expo floor.

The research included both qualitative and quantitative components, and findings from both confirmed that real/fresh/natural is clearly a trend and is expected to resonate with consumers over the long-term.

“There is evidence that real, fresh, and natural is not just a fad,” said Melinda Brunell of the Innovation Center, an entity that represents about 50 dairy companies. “It’s a cultural shift.”

Some of the findings—like the fact that words like “artificial” and “substitute” raise a red flag with consumers—are unsurprising. But others were a bit more unexpected. For example, focus group participants were “surprisingly okay,” with naturally occurring fats in a product, reported Cara Kelly of the Innovation Center. And “nobody thought twice” about vitamin D fortification, she noted. Nor did sodium content cause significant concern.

When the female focus group consumers were asked to explain what dairy meant to them, what emerged was the theme of nostalgia for a simpler time. “They did have a strong emotional connection to dairy,” said Kelly.

“Many cues need to work together to signal whether a food is real, fresh, or natural,” Kelly continued. These include packaging, shelf life, ingredient listing, and product form.

Presenter Loren Ward of Glanbia offered advice for food company marketers interested in capitalizing on the real/fresh/natural message. First of all, he said, know your target audience—and what is an appropriate level of real/fresh/natural to highlight. And be consistent in the way in which that message is delivered across your company’s product line, he said.

There are four key marketing themes that are being used to deliver the real/fresh/natural message, Ward said. They include the following: fresh from the farm; made like I would make it; short ingredient list; and made with real ingredients.

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