

FOLLOWING DEMAND

The seed business may be working diligently to improve health and well-being through enhanced and functional crops and foods, but is there really much consumer interest and demand?

By Ellen C. Wells

ACCORDING TO RESULTS from the International Food Information Council's 2007 Food & Health Survey, there is. The survey found that although 80% of Americans viewed their health as "very good" to "excellent", just 58% were "somewhat" or "extremely satisfied" with their current status. This reflects consumers' belief that they can be even healthier.

The study also revealed that consumers believe foods and beverages can help:

- improve heart health (80%);
- maintain overall health and wellness (77%);
- improve physical energy (76%);
- improve digestive health (76%);
- improve the immune system (71%); and
- reduce the risk of certain diseases (65%).

And more than 80% said they are currently consuming or would be interested in consuming foods and beverages that

provide health benefits. Consumer interest in enhanced and functional foods is present. Is the industry listening?

According to Laurie Schalow, Senior Director Public Relations for KFC, the quick-service restaurant chain listened when customers asked for a change to trans fat-free oil. "We knew this was an emerging health trend back in 2004," says Schalow. KFC began its search for a zero trans fat alternative with a similar taste profile long before cities and towns began the debate around banning trans fats from restaurants. The search and taste-testing took more than two years, until they settled on the low-linolenic oil produced from Vistive soybeans. Its purchasing cooperative worked with Monsanto and others to find and plant enough seed, harvest the beans and create the oil in order to ramp up supply for all of its 5,400 locations in April 2007. "Now consumers tell us 'thank you, I can eat KFC now because it doesn't contain trans fat'."

Not all enhanced or functional foods offered at the retail level are a result of consumers asking for them. Safeway grocery stores switched to trans fat-free oils for its in-house baked and fried products on its own initiative. "We switched due to general concerns for providing our customers with healthier products," says Teena Massingill, spokesperson for Safeway Inc. "We're trying to stay ahead of the curve." She adds that Safeway hasn't necessarily been approached by consumers looking for these products, but if they do appear on their shelves it's because these products are part of the food company's offerings.

Consumers may go directly to the top of the supply chain in their search for enhanced and specific foods. Kathryn Begeal, director of Ceres Organic Harvest's Hi-Fi program, says she's had calls from consumers asking how they can get these oats. They're interested in controlling their cholesterol or diabetes and expressed interest in the higher nutritional value they would receive from Hi-Fi oats (see story page 4) in the same serving size. "I think that once we have a formal marketing campaign around the Hi-Fi oat, there will be lots of interest." Begeal says Ceres has developed a logo it hopes to apply to all products containing Hi-Fi in order to convey the health benefits of the product and create demand throughout the supply chain.

The IFIC survey shows that consumers are interested in learning more about how foods and diet can help them with their health and wellness. It's up to all members along the supply chain to make sure the benefits of enhanced foods are communicated to the growing ranks of consumers looking to be fit and healthy.

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