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Featured Content

Nutrition Bars Fill a Role

Satiety and digestive health are key to keeping bar consumers happy in 2009, with fiber, probiotics and protein.

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Sitting down at a table to eat has almost become frowned upon in today's on-the-go society. It's for this reason that sales of nutrition bars continue to grow every year, and that consumers continue to find new reasons to eat them.

Sales of nutrition bars totaled \$416 million for the year ended October 4, 2008, according to The Nielsen Company, New York, NY, up 3.5% over the previous 12 months. However, this is minor compared to the breakfast bar category, which jumped nearly 10% during the same period, with sales totaling \$585 million.

And as has traditionally been the case, nutrition bars significantly trail behind granola and yogurt bars, whose sales for the 52 weeks ending October 4, 2008, were more than \$1 billion, representing an increase of more than 2% compared to the previous year.

The significant difference in size is probably related to the fact that the other two categories offer a wider variety of flavors, said Marcia Mogelonsky, senior research analyst at Mintel International, a Chicago, IL-based market research firm.

Breakfast and granola bars are also lower-calorie, so they appeal to women more. "And their image is lighter, as a breakfast replacement, and they have a more fun feel," she said.

Recent Trends

In a 2006 Mintel survey, 41% of respondents said they are eating more nutrition bars, with 43% of these people picking the bars they eat based on taste; 14% selecting the bars they eat based on health, wellness and physical needs such as diet. But perhaps most important, three-quarters of consumers are looking for a good source of protein or vitamins.

But it's not just about a search for nutrients in a good-tasting package. Sixty-eight percent of the participants in Mintel's survey said they eat nutrition bars because they're hungry or too busy to prepare food. "These things are the ultimate in portability," said Ms. Mogelonsky.

What consumers look for has changed in the past five years, according to Chris Brandt, vice president of marketing for Odwalla, Houston, TX. "Five years ago diet and high-performance bars were bigger, but now people are more concerned about nutrition."

Consumers are looking for calcium, antioxidants, vitamins A, C and E and fiber, he said, adding that as people learn more about probiotics, more attention has been focused on fiber.

And indeed, gut health, digestion and feeling full seem to be the buzz words for nutrition bars and are likely to be more so as we move into 2009.

"People are still looking for the more traditional claims but I think it'll come down to satiety," said David Morris, research director, Food & Beverage, with Mintel. "If there are healthful benefits, something that tastes good, and something that fills you up—if you have all three, you've got a winner."

And meeting the third of these needs, said Mr. Morris, is fiber, fueled by the huge success of Dannon's Activia yogurts in the past couple of years. "You're seeing a migration [of probiotics] into other categories, and not surprisingly, into portable products," he said.

The claims of fiber and probiotics work in tandem, according to Ms. Mogelonsky, but are likely aimed at different consumers. Fiber is a more recognizable word for older consumers, while the idea of probiotics appeals to a younger clientele. "No younger person wants to admit they've got gut health problems," she said, "but 'probiotics' sounds neat, it sounds modern."

First seen just in yogurt, probiotics can now be seen in other products, such as Kashi's Vive Probiotic Digestive Wellness Cereal and Applegate Farms' yogurt cheese.

Attune Probiotic Wellness Bars from Attune Foods, San Francisco, CA, were launched in November 2006. They're now in 4500 grocery stores across the country, typically more progressive thought-leaders, according to Rob Hurlbut, CEO of Attune.

Late last year the company announced that it was adding two Danisco probiotic strains—Howaru Dophilus and Howaru Bifido—to the bars to boost their digestive health and immunity benefits.

Attune's bars contain five times the amount of probiotics typically contained in yogurt, according to the company.

Attune Probiotic Wellness Bars are easy to find because they're not in the nutrition bar section of stores. Instead, they reside in the yogurt section since this is where consumers expect to find probiotics. There's also a practical side, said Mr. Hurlbut, because live cultures need to be chilled.

Consumers are also eating Detour Activity Bars from Forward Foods, Minden, NV, for their digestion. "The awareness of fiber is growing," said president and CEO Pat Muldoon, adding that consumers don't know exactly how much they need, but it's just important that it's there.

The other ingredient that's key, according to Melissa Abbott, senior trendspotter and analyst with Tinderbox, part of The Hartman Group, Bellevue, WA, is protein.

But similar to the role of fiber, protein is high on the list of priorities because it's filling, she said. "Satiety is the most compelling thing about bars," she added.

But Ms. Abbott acknowledged the growing trend toward fiber and probiotics. "We are so much more comfortable in the U.S., more than even just three years ago, talking about digestive and intestinal health," she explained.

We'll see more probiotics, she predicted, and consumers will start to understand better what they are as manufacturers add them to more foods.

Consumers' reasons for eating nutrition bars, said Ms. Mogelonsky, "are really positive reasons, and that's why we'll see more and more [bars] on the market." But she said she doesn't expect a lot more until the economy has improved since nutrition bars are not cheap.

"If people need the nutrition bars, they'll probably keep buying them," she said, pointing to people such as athletes and "athlete wannabes." And she expects this group of people to grow as people use exercise both for "sanity-protection" in the current economy, and to keep in the best health they can, especially if they've lost a job and their health insurance. Table 1 shows where most consumers are purchasing nutrition bars.

But consumption of nutrition bars by people who simply enjoy them may drop, she said. "If it's a fun thing to eat, people might stop. People might eat an apple, which is cheaper, instead."

To combat this, Ms. Mogelonsky said that nutrition bar companies should start selling their products in bulk to demonstrate value. "Boxes would help sales," she said, and a good idea would be variety boxes from manufacturers to prevent customer boredom. Even better, would be empty boxes in stores that consumers could fill with their favorite varieties.

Value isn't the point, however, when it comes down to organic claims, which are always going to be important to a minority of consumers, said Mr. Morris.

"There's always going to be a market for organic products. People who are more healthful than the norm are concerned about the safety of the food supply. But the natural trend has shown more legs in the past couple of years." This may be, he added, because cost is less of an issue with natural foods than organic.

On the other hand, Ms. Mogelonsky believes consumers will continue to buy organic nutrition bars if they're important to them, and trade off in other categories.

During the next five years, Mr. Brandt of Odwalla predicts consumers will place more importance on bars being natural. Although, in the immediate future, he added, price will be the most important factor when shoppers pick a nutrition bar.

Organic claims help sell the bars for the first sale, but only taste will encourage customers to buy the second, pointed out Mr. Brandt. He also believes that as the category matures, there will be more room for niche products such as gluten-free and diabetic varieties. Table 2 lists some of the most popular nutrition bar attributes.

The Latest Bar Introductions

Although taste may be the single reason that consumers buy a nutrition bar for the second time, there are many other things they're searching for in this convenient snack. As a result, manufacturers continue to innovate to meet market demands.

Already popular with eight flavors, last August Attune Foods added two more flavors to its line-up of Probiotic Wellness Bars: Chewy Chocolate and Peanut Butter & Chocolate, each containing at least 8.5 billion CFUs (colony forming units) of probiotics.

Customers are also starting to pay attention to prebiotics (the food source for probiotics), according to Attune's Mr. Hurlbut. In light of this development, the company is working to get the word out about the latter with education on its website. "[Prebiotics are] so specific that we need that kind of space," he said.

Attune's Chocolate Probiotic Wellness Bars all contain dark chocolate to play to consumers' preference for the health benefits of dark chocolate. There are four bars in this product lineup: Dark Chocolate (made with 68% cocoa), 100-calorie Mint Chocolate, Chocolate Crisp and Blueberry Vanilla.

With four product lines already enjoying success, thinkproducts launched its fifth last July. The thinkFRUIT line features four bars: Apple Noni Nourish, Cashew Acai Protect, Chocolate Pomegranate Power and Peanut Goji Glow.

These bars were launched to meet the increasing demand for superfruits, said Lizanne Falsetto, president and CEO of the Ventura, CA-based company.

Like thinkproducts' other bars, the fruit line is high-protein, high-fiber and soy- and gluten-free.

"We're trying to offer the healthiest snack for a portable lifestyle," said Ms. Falsetto. "People's eating habits have changed and they no longer sit at a table but are full speed."

The bars are more expensive than other products on the market, she explained, but consumers of them recognize that they contain top-level ingredients and don't mind paying extra.

All of the thinkproducts bars are wheat/gluten-free, but also important to consumers are high-protein and sugar-free, as the incidence of diabetes increases, Ms. Falsetto added.

Up next from thinkproducts are possibly some more snack-focused foods in a larger package, said Ms. Falsetto, because portion-controlled food can be part of everyone's lifestyle, especially at breakfast.

Late last year, Clif Bar, Berkeley, CA, introduced the LUNA cookie. This whole-grain snack has the chewy soft-baked consistency of a cookie, yet the nutrients of a nutrition bar, including fiber, omega 3s, folic acid and calcium.

Each 40-gram LUNA Cookie has 130 to 150 calories, 9 grams of whole grains, 3 to 4 grams of fiber, and 2 to 3 grams of protein. It's a good source of antioxidants (vitamins A, C and E), plus women-specific nutrients, such as folic acid, calcium, iron and B vitamins.

Each bar has 2.5 to 6 grams of fat and 10 to 11 grams of sugar, depending on the flavor. Each is vegetarian, vegan, organic and trans-fat free.

Established in 2003 as a new business unit for a manufacturer who was already making protein powder, Forward Foods, launched its newest Detour bar in September last year.

The Detour Lean Muscle bar is designed for serious athletes who are trying to build and maintain lean muscle. Each bar packs in 32 grams of high-quality protein, is fortified with 20 vitamins and minerals, and provides 2000 mg of healthy omega 3s.

The protein bars are for people who exercise and balance nutrition for performance, according to Forward Foods' Mr. Muldoon. These people consume the bars between meals for calories, three to six times per week.

Eating a nutrition bar is the next best thing to having something fresh and real, according to The Hartman Group's Ms. Abbott. But what disturbs some consumers, she said, is the long expiration dates on these products, leading them to wonder exactly what's in them.

One company that uses no preservatives is You Bar, Los Angeles, CA, whose bars typically last a maximum of two months.

Following similar models used by beverage companies like Jones Soda and others, You Bar is serving up bars made to order. At the end of 2007, the company started taking orders for personalized nutrition bars and has now made several thousand of them, according to Anthony Flynn, president, who co-founded the company with his mother, Ava Bise.

Not only can a customer build their perfect bar online, choosing from categories such as Base, Protein Powder, Nuts/Seeds, Dried Fruits and Berries, they can also name the bar whatever they like and it will appear on all 13 bars in that box.

Popular ingredients, said Mr. Flynn, include almond butter, organic dates and whey protein. The company adds new ingredients if there are enough requests for it. Goji berries were recently added due to demand.

"We thought there would be a small niche of people who wanted quality ingredients in their bars," said Mr. Flynn. "But after launching, we found that all kinds of people like them, including people with allergies, people with special needs, and even the vanity market—people who like to see their name on bars."

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