

Grocery Products Go for Gut Health

Using digestive health as the hook, many food companies are targeting consumers interested in fiber.

By Amanda Baltazar

A hundred years ago it was considered risqué to glimpse a woman's ankle and these days we're talking about our digestion and bowel habits. This ease of talking about our gut health is a pretty new phenomenon, largely brought about by the introduction, in 2006, of commercials for Activia yogurt.

Excited by the new emphasis on digestion, commercial food companies are ramping up their focus on fiber. Check the grocery aisles and you'll see everything from Activia Fiber yogurt and Kellogg's Fiber Plus snack bars to Protein Water from Designer Whey and Susta sweetener from NXT Nutritionals touting their fiber content.

In fact, said Tom Vierhile, director, product launch analytics with Datamonitor, Canandaigua, NY, product introductions with fiber claims have almost tripled since 2001 and they were up 8% in 2009 compared to 2008.

And according to The Nielsen Company, New York, NY, supermarket sales of products with fiber claims were up more than 11% for the year ending February 2, 2010, with large increases seen in categories including prepared foods, snacks, baked goods and baking mixes and desserts.

Of course, there was a big play on fiber in the 1980s but it's different now. To start with, the claims are more specific, said Lynn Dornblaser, director of consulting services for market research company Mintel, Chicago, IL.

Packages now are either stating how much fiber is in a serving of the product or are telling consumers the percentage of the daily requirement they'll get if they eat it, she pointed out.

Most consumers don't even know how much they should be consuming daily, said Ms. Dornblaser. (For the record, the Institute of Medicine recommends 38 grams daily for men up to age 50 and 25 grams for women up to age 50; for men and women over 50, it's 30 and 21 grams respectively.)

But consumers are, in general, more savvy now—they know why fiber is good for them. Satiety is a big reason many people are looking for it these days, especially in snack foods, pointed out Mr. Vierhile, adding that fiber is often paired with protein for this purpose.

Manhattan Beach, CA.-based Designer Whey launched its Protein Water, which contains 5 grams of fiber, a year ago. "People love the fiber because so much of our audience is using the product to help them with weight loss," commented spokeswoman Deanna Strickland.

"We wanted to do the right thing for our consumers because they are on the go; they're busy moms," said Lisa Wells, brand manager with Atkins Nutritionals, Denver, Colo., which launched its Chocolate Oatmeal Fiber bar (with 10 grams of fiber) last year. "And everyone knows that fiber will keep you full for longer."

The pairing of fiber and protein "is a strong claim that really resonates," Ms. Dornblaser explained. "Whether or not you are dieting, who wants to feel hungry?"

But it's not just about feeling full. "I think people are starting to look at their overall health, their heart, their digestive system," said Rod Bambach, vice president of sales, Racconto Foods, Melrose Park, IL, whose whole grain pastas tout their fiber content in bold letters on the boxes.

And Activia, the brand largely responsible for the emphasis on digestive health, introduced Activia Fiber in early 2009

for people who were looking for more texture in their yogurt.

“We decided to expand the brand to include a different taste experience,” said Michael Neuwirth, spokesman for The Dannon Company, White Plains, NY. Cereal was added to Activia, as well as insoluble fiber in the form of inulin, he pointed out, to give the new yogurts a more robust taste.

Since there’s such a plethora of products in this category, which ones are likely to have more success? Ms. Dornblaser believes those products in which the fiber is inherent will get the most attention, rather than products for which the claim is a little too far away from the category.

For example, she said, “Fiber works well in the grain based category, but it’s a little more difficult for yogurt. For water it’s an even bigger stretch.”

Mr. Vierhile agreed, pointing to an example of an ice cream novelty he’d come across with a fiber claim.

However, adding fiber to Activia seemed like a natural extension for the Dannon Company, said Mr. Neuwirth.

“Fiber has long been associated with digestive health and digestive wellness and that’s a core benefit of Activia, so fiber was a natural line extension because of the benefit already inherent in the product,” he explained.

And inherence was one of the reasons Rob Hurlbut, CEO of Attune Foods, San Francisco, CA, purchased cereal company Uncle Sam, last December. Mr. Hurlbut was already well aware of digestive health, since his company’s original products, Attune bars, are a good source of probiotics.

“Cereal is much more intuitive,” he pointed out, “and that was one of the appeals of expanding our portfolio.”

The Uncle Sam cereal is incredibly simple, containing just rolled wheat berries and flaxseeds, providing 10 grams of fiber per serving.

But what really helps sell products with fiber is the positive message. Consumers are bombarded with messages of what to avoid (sodium, fat, sugar, and so on), so the positive message that more fiber is good is well received.

“In general, we have seen products making claims that are more positive in nature (e.g. added fiber, added vitamins and minerals, wholegrain, all natural) increasing at a greater rate than those that talk about the absence of negatives (e.g. low fat, low calorie),” Ms Dornblaser pointed out.

“This is all about the concept of ‘inherent goodness’—how we are seeing more and more products focus on the positives rather than the negatives of nutrition,” she added.

So the news around fiber is good, except for one thing, Mr. Vierhile pointed out, and that’s where this trend might be going. It’s not just health foods that are touting their fiber content, but even foods designed for children. Froot Loops cereal, for example, has jumped onto the fiber bandwagon.

The problem, said Mr. Vierhile, is that “this could ultimately cause the trend to unravel if so-called ‘junk foods’ begin to bulk up with fiber to portray a more healthful image and the federal government begins to clamp down on the claim.”



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