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Dazed and Confused? Consumers' Health and Nutrition Issues

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Many Americans are trying to eat healthier, more balanced diets but face a constantly changing mix of messages and information about what foods and ingredients are healthy and nutritious and about the size of healthy portions.

Adding to the confusion, food companies describe their products in ads and on packaging with a wide range of words, many of which imply positive health benefits while not having official definitions in the context of food. Words such as “healthy,” “nutritious,” and “natural” are just a few examples.

Consumer confusion regarding food labels and health benefits might exacerbate major public health issues such as obesity. The rising rate of obesity, now well over 30 percent in the U.S., has put a spotlight on the processed food industry, as a key contributor to our nation’s weight issues and associated health challenges. In extreme situations, higher calorie, less nutritious foods are often more available and less expensive than healthy, fresh foods. In these so called “food deserts,” both urban and rural, some of the most nutritionally challenged Americans often have the least nutritious food options available nearby. Some food retailers have had mixed success in opening stores in food deserts but the relative prices of healthier foods remain a challenge for many lower income customers.

On a broader scale, food allergies and other dietary challenges have led to increased consumer demand for products that are, for example, gluten free or dairy free or nut free, etc. Demand for gluten-free foods far exceeds the needs of those who actually suffer from gluten allergies or varying degrees of celiac disease. The negative halo effect of publicity about gluten allergies has encouraged millions of Americans to seek gluten free products and many have adopted gluten free diets. In response, food manufacturers have rapidly expanded the number of gluten free products available, even reformulating existing products to remove gluten. Some marketers have jumped on the bandwagon by promoting in ads and on packaging that products are gluten free, even products have never contained gluten.

There is also growing demand for “clean label” or “free from” foods (and other personal and household products) as more consumers become concerned about the use and/or presence of herbicides, pesticides, hormones, dyes, and other additives or inputs. In response to consumer concerns and increasing demand, many manufacturers and retailers are reformulating existing products or introducing new products or entire product lines that are promoted as “free from” a long list of artificial and other ingredients.

One recent example: in August 2017, Hy-Vee Inc., Iowa-based operator of 240 supermarkets in Iowa and 7 other Midwestern states, announced it is reformulating its line of private label products to eliminate over 200 common food ingredients ranging from artificial flavors to yellow dye #6. The list of ingredients targeted for elimination is posted on the Hy-Vee website. Hy-Vee calls this their “Clean Honest Ingredients” label initiative and each reformulated product will have a logo indicating “Clean Honest Ingredients” so consumers can easily identify the products on store shelves.

Another recent example is Mondelez International’s August 2017 launch of a new brand called Veal. Veal is a line of snack crackers, bars, and crisps that includes no artificial colors or flavors and is Non-GMO Project Verified. These snack foods include simple ingredients such as barley, butternut squash, chick peas, coconut, quinoa, and seeds. Mondelez has also reformulated some of its iconic brands and also successfully introduced the Good Thins cracker brand in 2016.

Consumers are beginning to realize the power of their purchase decisions to dictate what and how the food industry provides. However, with the pressures of busy daily lives, many consumers are challenged to understand the myriad issues regarding food choices.

Smart marketers are those who seize the opportunity to provide great products as well as great information to help consumers wade through the confusion to make better choices. Food growers, processors, and marketers should inform consumers about the methods used, the ingredients, and the nutritional impact of their food products. Clarity and consistency of messaging across labels, signs, websites, social media, etc. are critical to help reduce confusion and clarify product attributes. Providing transparency and clear information will help build trust for consumers who already use the product and help encourage non-users to try the product.

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