



## Top of Mind

*Consumer perceptions of technology often affect shopping habits*

If you take a look at anyone's pantry, you're bound to find canned foods. Open the fridge and there's likely to be milk or orange juice. But very rarely does the general population think twice or at all about the science used to produce these everyday items, or the technology used to process them.

But what happens when consumers are confronted with an additive they don't understand? Or something called nanotechnology? Will it affect whether or not they purchase that item? If so, should food manufacturers do something to educate those consumers?

Spencer Henson thinks so. Henson is a professor in the department of Agricultural Economics and Business at Ontario's University of Guelph. He's currently undertaking a study looking at which food technologies do cause consumers to think twice. The study, which was due to be completed in late November, aims to identify the areas that cause consumer concern. "What we want to do is try and understand the ways in which consumers think about new technologies with respect to food, and on that basis try and predict how they are likely to respond to technologies in the future," says Henson.

Consumers, it seems, are often less welcoming of new food technology. Carol Culhane, president of Toronto-based International Food Focus Ltd., believes that when it comes to new technology and cars, computers and healthcare, for instance, consumers expect advances. "Healthcare can be very invasive in someone's body, yet there seems to be an acceptance of it," she says. When it comes to food processing technology, however, consumers have certain beliefs – which may not always be correct – that play a strong role in food trends. "We all have to be careful because there can be so many other factors [influencing how consumers feel about a certain technology]. I think we



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learned a lot about this with the introduction of genetically modified food, which is an agronomic technology," says Culhane. "The research done prior to the introduction of the technology showed that consumers were going to be leery about this."

What Henson and his team are finding is that consumers don't think of risk in the same way scientists do. For instance, canning and pasteurization are generally accepted technologies because of "the test of time," says Henson. He explains that in making a purchasing decision, consumers generally assess how long the technology has been around, and how well established or familiar it is. They also determine if it's beneficial technology, or if there are any risks to them or their children. Henson also found that consumers might be accepting of canning and pasteurization, but are ambivalent when it comes to food additives. And when it comes to genetic modification "they seem to think that the risks are well over the benefits," he says.

In assessing what food manufacturers should do, Culhane says it all depends on the technology. "If it's going to deliver a safer product, better tasting, better shelf life and there's no downside...why should the consumer even have to know?" she

says. However, in regard to certain additives, like trans fats, some education may be required. In this case many consumers think it's as simple as taking the trans fat out and adding something else in. "Those are consumers who don't know what they're talking about," says Culhane.

Which goes back to Henson and the other aim of his study: to show the industry the importance of thinking about the technology that's being used – whether it's an additive or an agronomic technology – and its link to consumer perception early in the manufacturing process. Usually, says Henson, it's "an afterthought."

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