



Stealth Health

Products that “hide” their health qualities hit the mark with many consumers

Ever heard of stealth health? It’s a term I heard mentioned frequently at the International Food Technologists’ Annual Meeting and Food Expo, held in June in Orlando, Fla. It refers to good-for-you products that look, smell and taste like their full fat, salt or sugar counterparts, but contain natural or artificial fortified ingredients – things like vitamins, calcium, magnesium, antioxidants or omega-3 – as well as natural or artificial low-calorie, low-fat or low-salt substitutes that up the nutritional quotient of “regular” food and beverage products. In other words, familiar tasting, nutritionally superior foods that “hide” their healthy qualities.

While the concept of making healthy foods taste great is neither original nor unattainable – consider the number of successful natural or “health food” producers now in the market – stealth health goes beyond simply providing better-for-you options. Instead, it represents the realization by the food ingredients industry that while consumers may want the nutritional benefits of eating well, they don’t necessarily want to sacrifice flavour, mouthfeel or familiarity. They also don’t want to change their diet or eating patterns significantly, and they don’t want to give up their customary brands. Essentially, instead of seeking out foods labelled as “healthy,” they want food solutions that remind them of their favourite snacks, entrées and desserts.

According to a Statistics Canada report on Canadian eating habits released in July, many of us are not making the wisest food choices. The *Canadian Community Health Survey: Overview of Canadians’ Eating Habits* found that:

- One quarter of Canadians age 31 to 50 get more than 35 per cent of their total calories from fat, compared to an average of 31 per cent fat in 2004;
- Seven out of 10 children age four to eight, and half of adults, do not eat five servings of vegetables and fruit each day;
- Snacks now account for more calories than breakfast,

and approximately the same calories as lunch;

- Canadians get one-fifth of their calories from foods and beverages that are not one of the four food groups.

What does this mean? It means that while nutritional information is more readily available than at any other time in history, not everyone is prepared to digest the idea of eating better today for a healthier tomorrow. And let’s face it, shopping for fresh produce, cooking healthy meals and snacking smart all the time can be a challenge, especially when you’re juggling work and family commitments. It also means that consumers will rely on familiar brands and meal options when they’re starved for time.

For producers, however, it represents a tremendous opportunity for the acceptance of stealth health products, especially those with familiar tastes and convenient packaging that make it easier for consumers to make better nutrition choices. The Food and Consumer Products of Canada’s recently released report *The Canadian Food and Beverage Industry: Committed to Healthy Active Living*, is evidence that this trend is already on the rise. Of the 62 per cent of Canadian food manufacturers who introduced healthier products in 2004, 41 per cent had less fat, 22 per cent had less sugar, and 23 per cent introduced portion-controlled packaging. Other notable category launches included omega-3 products, reduced-salt products, fibre and fibre-added products, calcium and calcium-added products and low-calorie products.

When it comes right down to it, eating nutritiously shouldn’t be a chore, nor should it be a challenge. And for consumers who have the time to ensure they eat a balanced diet, it’s not. But the reality is that a significant portion of us are still relying on the convenience of ready-to-eat entrées, portable snacks and packaged ingredients. If we can get our daily dose of fibre, vitamins and minerals all at the same time, all the better. Just don’t tell us it’s good for us!

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