



## Show Me the Signs

*POP nutrition programs help health-conscious consumers find what they want – fast*

**F**rançois Bouchard's The Country Grocer, the Ottawa retail grocery store he's owned since 1995, is about two doors down from a doctor's office. Approximately four years ago Bouchard started noticing a steady stream of middle-age consumers and seniors coming in, having just been told their sugar was high or that they were diabetic. When it comes to food choices, they wondered, what now?

Many of the seniors found the nutrition facts tables "complicated," recalls Bouchard, and would ask him to find them no-sugar-added or low-sugar products. "I would bring them to the aisle and show them brands with the diabetes association recommended symbols," he says. "They'd say, 'Thanks, but I would never have found those cookies among the 125 you sell.'"

This happened often enough – and often enough when Bouchard wasn't there to help – that the grocer decided to use danglers, which protrude right off the shelf, to highlight no-sugar-added products throughout the store. Since then, Bouchard has added danglers for no-sodium-added, organics and now for gluten-free products. His system is not sophisticated, he says, but works. "When you get to the jam section, it's easy. You can buy off the shelf and not look at the rest."

The concept of alerting health-conscious consumers to certain products is not new, but it is a growing trend, appearing more often on grocery shelves and food packages. In September, a Portland, Maine-based grocery chain, Hannaford Bros., introduced Guiding Stars, its own storewide system of rating foods by placing stars on shelf price tags. Also in September Unilever announced that it was introducing the Choices stamp, its in-house rating system, which will appear on all its foods and beverages around the world. In Canada, consumers first saw the SmartSpot symbol, another in-house rating system, appear on Pepsi-QTG Canada products in 2005, says Kristyn Hall, a Calgary-based member of the Dietitians of Canada.

In September, the Dietitians of Canada released a report on these programs or what it calls point-of-purchase (POP) nutrition programs. The study looked at "check marks, traffic light symbols, coloured dots and 'heart-healthy' decals" that are now appearing on food packages, restaurant menus,

vending machines and in workplace cafeterias. The report can also apply to grocery store-level programs. What the study found, says Hall, was that eight in 10 Canadians want some way of quickly identifying healthy foods and beverages. "There are more than 30,000 food products available on grocery store shelves and some consumers just want to see, 'This is a healthier product,'" says Hall.

The programs come out positive in the study – in fact, as Hall says, "it is fantastic" that consumers have more choice and the programs are "a step in the right direction in addressing consumer demand" – but it does say that more research is necessary. To that end the study outlines areas for further research, including investigating the impact on Canadians' actual eating habits and disease risks; credibility; whether or not these programs are causing confusion; what the government role should be; and the impact of marketing and promoting these programs. (For more, see the study at: <http://www.dietitians.ca/resources/resourcesearch.asp?fn=view&contentid=7017>.)

There are also potential drawbacks. As Hall explains, some programs focus on the absence of ingredients (such as highlighting the fact that a product has no trans fat or no sugar) and some on the presence of ingredients (such as vitamin A or folic acid). "It could create a situation where consumers are not comparing apples to apples," she says. And if a product doesn't have a POP symbol, it doesn't mean it's not a healthy choice. Hall cites applesauce as an example. "Applesauce would fit within a POP program by some criteria, but not all applesauce jars contain a symbol," she says, noting that consumers might not always be clear as to why that's the case.

Back at The Country Grocer, Bouchard believes he's on to something with his program. What he's finding difficult, however, is sourcing new products for his categories. Even so, he believes more programs like his will crop up. "They're easy to implement. And I think that [health] trends are nationwide," he says. "You're seeing companies trying to do it as much as possible on their packages... Hopefully we're going to see more products... and more done to develop those products."

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Pepsi-QTG's SmartSpot symbol.