

Growing awareness of health and safety issues

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More joint ventures

HEALTH, nutrition and food safety are vital issues with phenomenal profits at stake - and as manufacturers and grocery chains seek points of differentiation, the health aspect is seen as one way of creating that distinction.

The industry is aware, too, that a failure of safety for one product can lead to a collapse in demand across an entire food sector.

Two significant phases in the past decade have also spurred customer-demand in the UK for healthier, "more natural" food and subsequent effort by the food industry to meet this demand.

The first first was the publication of the 1983 discussion paper from the National Advisory Committee for Nutrition and Education (Nacne), recommending more detailed food-labelling, and the report - a year later - on diet and cardiovascular disease by the Department of Health on medical aspects of food policy.

The second phase was the more recent wave of food safety scares over salmonella and listeria.

In 1976, the European Commission issued a directive on nutritional information for foods. This was later included in the Food Labelling Regulations of 1984.

UK Government interest in the links between diet and heart disease also speeded up the process of giving nutritional information, the foundations of which had already been laid by some of the larger food companies. While rigorous product testing and sampling techniques are now common among today's manufacturers, the food chains also provide a vast range of information about nutritional values and healthy eating habits.

Among the first, for example, was the ABF subsidiary, Allied Bakeries, which added information to its Allinson and Vit-Be bread in 1983. In 1985 the Allinson and Vit-Be Hi Bran brands were the first bread products to carry the Health Education Council endorsement. The "Bread is Good For you" campaign came out of the discussions to reduce bread's salt content.

Kellogg had already adopted a standard format for labelling in 1979. Eden Vale was the first dairy goods manufacturer to label its products with nutritional information in response to increased consumer interest.

St Ivel launched its Gold brand in 1977 which carried

details of energy and reduced fat-content. In 1982, it introduced nutritional data on yoghurts, salads and cottage cheese.

Manufacturers such as Fin-dus, Nabisco Brands, Pasta Foods and Flora manufacturer Van den Berghs & Jurgens began to produce publications on healthy eating.

This activity was largely limited to famous brand names. But in 1985 Tesco became the first UK supermarket chain to provide nutritional information on its own-label products, well in advance of legislation.

The company also produced a series of leaflets introducing consumers to healthy eating - this programme was supported by consumer advisory groups around the country.

Jimmy Gulliver's Argyll Stores launched a Customer Information Programme in 1985 for its Presto Food Markets. The company supplied free leaflets and menu suggestions.

British Home Stores also launched its Natural Foods range with nutritional labelling. Bejam, well-known for its innovative products, created a Healthy Eating Advisory Service, with advice on how to organise personal diets.

The Co-operative Wholesale Society launched an "Eat Right" campaign, introducing a booklet, wall chart, leaflets and nutrition advisory service. It also began uniform nutrition-information for the labelling on its 1,500 own-label products. In the same year, Sainsbury announced that it would label its 4,000, plus own-label goods with nutrition information to a standard format.

Concern with health increased during the 1980s as the issues of additives, pesticides and organic food became areas of intense consumer-con-

cern. Interest in vegetarianism increased to the extent that large superstores now devote entire sections to health products and supplements. Numerous scares concerning drinking water in the late

The economic cost of safety mishaps in manufacturing can be high. Source Perrier, the French mineral water group, whose international brand image has been built on purity and health, recently withdrew its world stocks of 160m bottles, following the discovery of minute traces of benzene in some shipments. The sudden setback for Perrier provided a massive boost for rival mineral water suppliers.

As health-consciousness increases, supermarket chains place tough demands on their suppliers. In the area of fruit supplies, for example, the Tesco chain will not sell apples sprayed with the controversial pesticide, Alar (which is allowed in the UK, but banned in the US.)

So seriously do the supermarkets take the health and safety issue that six of them funded the UK's Food Safety Advisory Centre last year which brought rivals together in joint research programmes.

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