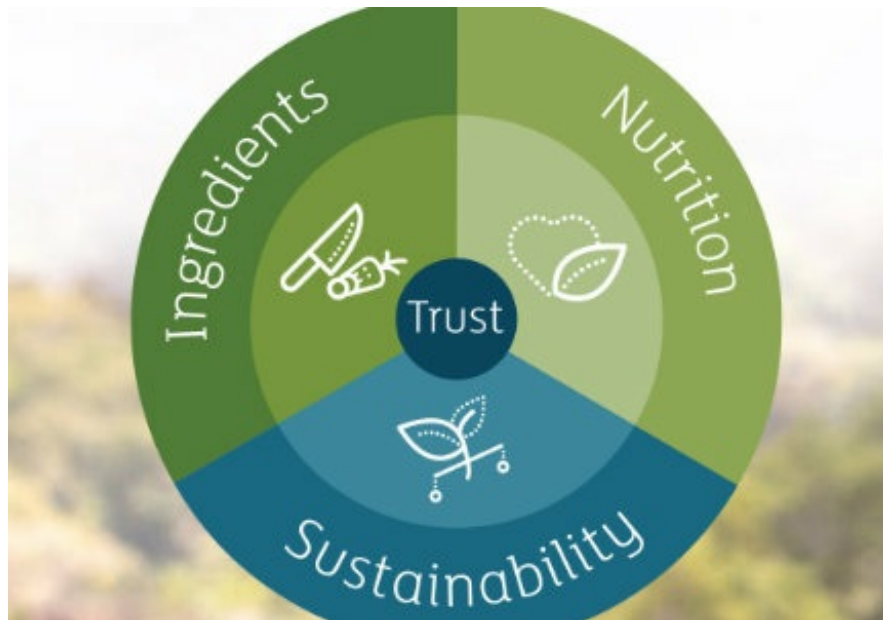


Food Formulating Vision: Is premium becoming the new clean label?

meatpoultry.com/articles/news_home/Product_Formulation/2017/11/Food_Formulating_Vision_Is_pre.aspx

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Infographic: A New Framework for Clean Label (Source: Kerry)

Today's consumers expect more than just great-tasting foods and beverages, according to Shelley Balanko, senior vice president, The Hartman Group, Bellevue, Washington. Speaking at Food Vision USA on Nov. 15, in Chicago, Balanko said consumers want to know what's in their food and drink, how it was made, who made it and why. They seek the answers to these questions not to satisfy a craving for data in this Information Age, but to determine food and beverage quality. Clean, natural and less processed foods are deemed high quality, or premium, in a culture that is increasingly focused on health and wellness.

She further explained that "premium" is a rapidly growing segment within the food and beverage marketplace. The concept is driven by consumer demand for better health and more compelling food and beverage experiences.

What exactly is premium varies by food category. It often includes the story behind the product and recipe, along with the sourcing of ingredients. For many perishable foods merchandised in the perimeter of supermarkets — for example, meat and poultry — clean label is evolving to have a premium component. And, that premium designation may contradict the foundation of the clean-label movement.

Eating clean started out as being all about avoiding foods with additives, preservatives or other chemicals on the label. While it may seem well intentioned, Ruth MacDonald and Ruth Litchfield, professors of food science and human nutrition at Iowa State Univ. in Ames, Iowa, warn of the consequences in terms of food waste, safety and cost.

Litchfield expects food waste in the US — already about 20 lbs. per person each month — will only get worse with the removal of additives and preservatives. Without many additives, foods will spoil faster, increasing food safety

risk and the likelihood of more food ending up in the trash. This is not a very sustainable approach to feeding the growing population.

The professors both agree that just because an ingredient or additive has an unfamiliar name does not automatically make it bad for you. The decision to remove additives appears to be driven more by market demand than consideration of the benefits these additives provide and the potential food safety risk, they said. Removing nitrates from deli meats and hot dogs is one example.

MacDonald, who has spent more than 25 years investigating links between diet and cancer, defends the use of nitrates, as they play a necessary role in preventing the growth of *Clostridium botulinum*, a deadly bacterium that causes food poisoning. Therefore, completely removing nitrates would be problematic, she said.



It's only a matter of time before consumers start to realize that free-from artificial ingredient claims don't improve the nutrition profile of high-fat, high-sodium foods such as bacon. With such products, premium meat sourcing and processing may be more compelling reasons to purchase.

Food labels boasting "no nitrates" typically refer to the synthetic version, according to MacDonald. If the package says "naturally cured" or "uncured" it likely includes celery juice — a natural source of nitrates — as an ingredient. The nitrates in celery juice are not chemically different from synthetic forms, she said.

"People have a hard time understanding the risk-benefit ratio when it comes to foods. They see a chemical, such as nitrates, listed on the label and assume it is bad or the food contains a high amount," MacDonald said. "The food safety risk without these preservatives is so much greater."

The chemical function of nitrates is the same regardless of the source, MacDonald added, so replacing synthetic nitrates with natural sources does not make food safer. In fact, research has shown that the amount of nitrates in celery juice is not always consistent. MacDonald says with synthetic nitrates, food manufacturers can add the precise amount to protect against food poisoning.

However, the trend towards this indirect addition of nitrates continues to build momentum as part of the clean-label movement. Savvy consumers may eventually get a better understanding of the labeling jargon, which is why the concept of premium is starting to factor into product development and innovation.

This is where education becomes paramount. Explain to the consumer why certain ingredients are used in a product. When doing so, tout the sourcing of other ingredients to communicate the premium nature of the product.

Further, with some foods, including meat and poultry, consumers may be starting to realize that free-from artificial ingredient claims don't improve the nutrition profile of the food. With such products, premium meat sourcing and processing may be more compelling reasons to purchase.



Artisan crafting suggests premium stature and is part of the evolving clean-label movement.

Wright Brand bacon, for example, boasts the premium-nature of its product by describing it as hand selected and hand trimmed. It's made using a 90-year old proprietary curing recipe that brings forth uncompromising flavor. The brand has a history of doing things a certain way, and has no plans on changing. It's an enticing story and one to which many true bacon aficionados gravitate regardless of the ingredient list.

This story complements the artisanal trend that taps into claims of provenance, locally sourced and handmade. These are descriptors suggestive of premium stature and are part of the evolving clean-label movement.

Jon Hopkinson, senior application scientist, DuPont Nutrition & Health, New Century, Kansas, says, "The clean-label issue is a problem for the food industry, but it is a problem that comes directly from the food industry. In attempting to distinguish one's product from the competition, the industry has spread fear and distrust among their own consumers. The extent of this problem is so huge that consumers now suspect that even a process like pasteurization is suspect and thought to be possibly dangerous."

This is where recent research from Kerry, Beloit, Wisconsin, should be considered by meat and poultry processors with clean-label projects in their queue.

"The clean label movement marks an undeniable transformation of the American consumer and the food industry," says Kate Toews, vice president of strategic marketing at Kerry. "Manufacturers, retailers and foodservice operators are responding with new and improved products. As the industry constantly evolves, understanding what consumers want has become critical to success."

Kerry's online survey of more than 700 American consumers shows that clean label has evolved to be more than

ingredients.

“Our research shows that consumers expect better ingredients as well as safe, nutritious and eco-friendly products,” says Toews. “Seventy-five percent of consumers indicated they evaluate ingredients on package, while 66 percent look at the nutritional panel. To consumers, clean label represents a ‘good food future’ with ingredients that are healthy, nutritious and sustainable.”

This translates to premium.

The survey showed that millennials are more likely to look for additional confirmations through claims and certifications such as organic and made with real ingredients. These claims are indicators of a premium food, with premium foods commanding a premium price that the majority are willing to pay.

“Our research revealed that clean label is a catch-all indicator of healthy and safe food, with three clear areas of consumer expectations: ingredients, nutrition and sustainability,” Toews says. “Ingredients remain the most critical, with approximately 40 percent of consumers’ perceptions influenced by specific ingredients. Additionally, we confirmed that broader health and nutrition expectations are an integral part of the clean-label movement, with approximately 40 percent of consumer perceptions driven by nutritional value. Finally, we see the rising importance of sustainability, as approximately 20 percent of consumer clean-label perceptions were based on brand identity, sourcing, company practices and manufacturing methods.”

Consumers will continue to prioritize and re-prioritize the attributes that are important in their foods; however, premium will never fall out of favor. Stay true to your product, your recipe and your process.