

Breaking News on Food & Beverage Development - North America

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Datamonitor: The potential and dangers of superfoods

By Vicky McCrorie, Datamonitor

10/24/2007- ***Superfoods have taken the market by storm in recent years, but food manufacturers need to take a step back and use the ingredients with caution if they are to continue reaping the benefits, says Datamonitor in a FoodNavigator-USA.com series contributed by market researchers.***

As the legitimacy of health claims comes under closer scrutiny, superfoods risk falling out of grace as quickly as they appeared.

The potential of these products and ingredients first started emerging around three years ago, spurred on by the growing importance placed by consumers on their health, and by their more adventurous taste buds.

However, a tightening of regulations, particularly in Europe where the European Commission has started clamping down on bogus superfood claims, could soon place limits on these opportunities as consumers grow tired of the new fad and start to question the legitimacy of its claims.

The new European Nutrition and Health Claims Regulation, which came into force in July, means that no food or beverage product will be allowed to be labeled under vague or generic terms such as 'good for your heart', 'help lower cholesterol', or branded as a 'superfood' without scientific backing.

What are superfoods?

Although no official definition of superfoods is available, these have come to be defined as foods that offer health benefits beyond basic nutrition, improving overall health or offering disease prevention.

The term spans a vast array of foods, usually encompassing those with high antioxidant contents, from fruits such as pomegranate, açai and goji berries, to green tea, soy and even red wine and dark chocolate.

Overall, there are around 100 food ingredients that have been categorized as a superfood, giving manufacturers many opportunities to add them to a range of food and drink products such as snack bars, energy drinks, juice blends and food supplements.

Superfood popularity surge

One of the most popular superfoods of the moment is pomegranate, benefiting from reports that it contains high antioxidant levels and can prevent heart disease and other illnesses.

The fruit first began to be hailed as a superfood in 2004, when a study by scientists in Israel reported that pomegranate juice contains the highest antioxidant capacity compared to other juices, and could reduce the formation of 'bad' cholesterol.

Reports such as these have driven its popularity. According to Datamonitor's Productscan database of new product launches, over 650 new food and drinks launches containing this ingredient were recorded in the US in the first nine months of 2007. This compares to less than 20 product launches in 2004, highlighting the relative newness of its popularity.

Another superfood that is gaining popularity is the açai berry, which was given a boost after being endorsed by Oprah Winfrey. On Oprah's website, açai is listed as the number one superfood, stating that it is "*one of the most nutritious and powerful foods in the world*".

The açai berry has been praised for its cholesterol-lowering abilities, gaining the interest of the health conscious nation. Its exotic origins (the Amazon) have also helped heighten its appeal, tapping into consumer desires for novel taste sensations from exotic climes.

Apart from these two superfruits, other popular superfood ingredients include green tea and soy.

The former has experienced a substantial rise in popularity in the US in recent years. Datamonitor reports that green tea sales in the US hit \$160m in 2006, up from \$119m in 2001, as it benefited from growing interest in its supposed health benefits (including aiding heart disease and cancer sufferers).

Soy sales have also grown substantially, profiting from an increased interest in its reported cholesterol-lowering properties; US sales of soy saw year-on-year growth of over 13 percent between 2001 and 2006.

Even foods that consumers previously believed to be bad for them are gaining superfood status.

The Department of Food Science and Technology at Cornell University in the US has recently reported its findings that dark chocolate has nearly twice as many antioxidants as red wine, and up to three times as many as green tea.

Another report recently stated that alcohol can help increase the antioxidant capacity of superfoods, leading one vodka manufacturer (Luctor International) to launch a range of açai and blueberry vodka. However, the negative health impact of the vodka could well erase the positive affects incurred by drinking this beverage.

Caution recommended

With more superfoods being launched in areas traditionally perceived as non-healthy, superfoods are in danger of losing their current popularity.

Already, consumers are beginning to be sceptical about some of the health claims touted by these foods, with some products even claiming they can treat HIV. Recent studies have claimed that green tea may help ward off the HIV infection, although some scientists are unconvinced: Professor Mike Williamson of Sheffield University was reported as saying that you would need to consume several hundreds cups a day to get any positive affects.

It is these spurious claims that the European Union has attempted to eradicate with the introduction of new legislation on superfoods.

Food companies marketing their products in Europe can now only make claims about the nutritional or health benefits of these if they are approved by the European Food Safety Authority.

Although the US currently has no similar legislation, consumers may create their own form of self-regulation and act with the feet, if producers continue to make claims on products that cannot be backed up.

Therefore, while it is understandable that manufacturers would want to embrace the superfoods trend and introduce novel products that fit in with consumer desires for healthier products, they should do so with caution, as consumers are likely to lose faith in superfoods if they continue to make health claims that cannot be justified.

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