



August 2010



Best Practices in Promoting Food Health Benefits

Insights from an Environmental Scan

Canada's agri-food sector has a variety of options for promoting the value-added health benefits of its products. For example, health claims on packages and in advertising can be an effective way of increasing consumer awareness of a food product's health benefits. However, it can require significant time and resources to substantiate a new health claim, and the long-term impact on market share is unknown. Alternatives such as websites, print and electronic resources, and partnerships can also be used to enhance consumer awareness of the health benefits of a food product and potentially reach a wider target audience. Such nutrition communication programs can build on existing health claims, or can operate effectively without a claim or without mentioning an existing claim.

The Food Regulatory Issues Division of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada commissioned an environmental scan¹ to investigate the best practices in promoting the health benefits of food. The scan investigated whether nutrition activities can be a successful alternative to a health claim and what components of these activities may be effective. Fifteen organizations (9 Canadian-based and 6 US-based) were consulted. Although limited in number, the organizations represented diverse commodities with communication activities that varied, operated with a range of resource support, and had differing mandates. Special attention was paid to their website nutrition and health communications activities, and additional information was gathered from interviews with organization representatives. The insights will be useful to commodity groups that are planning either to conduct or to revamp initiatives aimed at promoting the health benefits of their products.

Activities as an Alternative to Health Claims

Not all of those consulted believe that health claims, specifically disease risk reduction claims, are important to consumers. Other types of claims such as nutrient content or general health claims including logos may be more effective due to their simplicity. Most organizations contacted believe that nutrition communications activities are appropriate either as an alternative or complementary to a health claim. Aside from the time and resources required to obtain approval for a new health claim, the amount of information that can be presented on a label or in advertising is limited. Activities such as websites and other resources allow organizations to provide scientific evidence and practical information to their target audience. Evidence is lacking on the impact of these activities versus a health claim to increase awareness, knowledge or behaviour change. However, whether the information is on a website or on a label, the audience must view it as credible and it must comply with the CFIA *Guide to Food Labelling and Advertising*.²

Effectiveness of Website Nutrition and Health Communications

An organization's website is a key activity with the potential to reach a large audience. Two main features influence the projected effectiveness of website nutrition and health communications: the quality of the information, and how well the website supports the communication of the information.

¹ The scan was conducted by NutriData Consulting Services. The project was coordinated by the Food Regulatory Issues Division of AAFC and directed by the Primary and Further Processors' Working Group of AAFC's Grains Innovation Roundtable.

² The CFIA Guide is available at www.inspection.gc.ca/english/fssa/labeti/guide/toce.shtml. Section 8-12 addresses educational versus advertising material.

Quality nutrition and health information

Quality nutrition and health information answers the question, “is it credible and useful?” The information must be scientifically sound, balanced and not misleading. The information is enriched if it is practical and offers consumers concrete ways to use the commodity. Recipes become the bridge between knowledge and practice; almost every organization reviewed featured recipes using their product. A modest amount of well-prepared, well-targeted, yet original information can be effective. The addition of more varied activities to communicate the nutrition and health information can expand the reach of the message.

| Table 1: Features of quality nutrition and health content | |
|--|---|
| Scientifically sound | Examples of ways to boost the scientific credibility of the nutrition and health content include regular updating of pages with new information (evident by displayed dates), involving and disclosing independent expert authors, reviewers and/or scientific advisors, using references from reputable sources, and including links to credible third party websites. |
| Balanced and not misleading | The best communications programs avoid overstating the health effects of their commodity and instead present their product's unique features within the context of a healthy diet. |
| Audience clarity (stated or implied) | Content can be targeted to a variety of audiences, including the general public, health professionals, children, classroom educators and the media. The key is to be clear on the target of the content and inform the site visitor with clear headings. |
| Original | As a best practice, the website should contain pages of information, documents, and/or activities that have been developed specifically to communicate about the organization's commodity. Limited funds may dictate that an organization only provides a small amount of nutrition and health content, but the nutrition and health section must be more than a list of links to external websites. The basics of quality nutrition and health content would include key information about the commodity's nutritional value and practical information on what it looks like, where to buy it, how to store it, and how to cook with it. |
| Practical | A best practice is to offer consumers tangible ways to use a commodity. Recipes are a powerful support in using a food. Sites with recipe contests, invitations to rate recipes, ways to submit and feature a winning recipe, and good quality, downloadable print copies of recipes generate interest in the commodity. For the media, practical support can be provided in the form of statistics, article help, photos, and access to experts. |
| Varied activities | The more varied the activities, the better, as different people respond to different ways of learning. To augment web pages of information, organizations may choose to feature interactive recipe sections, cookbooks, calendars, videos, lesson plans, interactive games, kids' colouring pages, promotional items such as buttons and stickers, recipe contests, symposium summaries, educational podcasts, and e-newsletters. A growing trend is the use of social networking media such as blogs, Twitter and Facebook to disseminate information rapidly and to build a connection with users; its effectiveness is unknown. |
| Logically organized | In the case of multi-purpose websites, it is best if the nutrition and health information is housed in one section, accessed from the main page by a clear, descriptive and noticeable link such as “Nutrition and health”. If organizations with larger budgets choose to organize their nutrition information into separate topics on separate websites, the main site should identify the various websites and describe their content and target audience. This will make it easier for the user to find the appropriate information. |

Support for effective communication of the information

Several key website attributes play a supporting role in shaping effective nutrition and health communications.

| Table 2: Key features of effective supporting attributes | |
|---|---|
| Attribute | Recommendations |
| Web writing style Is it well written, and written for online reading? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pyramid style for content where the conclusions are presented first Concise, short paragraphs with about half the word count of a hardcopy version Meaningful page titles, headings and subheadings that deliver information and provide clear direction (e.g. “nutritious breakfasts” rather than “eating well”) Text that can be scanned—bulleted lists, links, bolded text Clear language |
| Page design Is the website design predictable and appealing? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistent “look” to the pages (user can focus on content rather than having to adjust to changing layouts) Absence of flash (such as moving parts, changing messages, animation and sound) Prudent use of photos/images to enhance pages without making them slow to load Layout that makes good use of white space Good contrast between font and background; no watermark Printer-friendly format |
| Navigation Can users find what they are looking for easily? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A visible search feature that generates useful information A sitemap (as an overview and secondary navigation tool) Plain language menu bars that guide users to what they want Overviews that effectively orient users to the section contents Links that use one consistently applied technique Content and links that are kept up to date Minimal use of PDF files, or descriptive summaries to introduce a PDF file |
| Organization identity Can users tell who is behind it? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Homepage tagline that tells users who the organization is and what it offers them Noticeable “About us” link from the homepage Convincing “About us” text that is jargon-free and connects with site users Contact information with names, positions and full contact details Logo on every page to reinforce the organization’s identity and alert users to when a link takes them away from the site |

Factors for Success

In addition to an effective website, organizations with the financial and human resources can best increase awareness about the nutrition and health benefits of their food or food product by selecting a key target audience, developing messages that resonate with that audience, and developing activities to reach that audience—whether through a public service announcement, an advertisement, a recipe booklet, school lesson plans, or newsletters.

Purpose and audience

The purpose of nutrition activities is to increase awareness of a food or food product and to educate consumers about its nutritional value with a goal of increasing purchase or consumption of that food. One of the biggest challenges identified, as well as one of the most important factors of a successful nutrition communication activity, is selecting the target audience and developing the right message that resonates with this group. The target audience must relate directly to the message to increase awareness, knowledge and ultimately a change in behaviour.

Money and resources

Larger budgets allow organizations to conduct more sophisticated nutrition communication activities such as interactive websites, public service announcements, and advertisements, as well as have staff support to develop or coordinate these projects. However, it is evident that effective nutrition communication activities can be successful even with a limited budget. Regardless of budget, activities can be successful if the following best practice concepts are kept in mind:

- Develop the activity/resource with the target audience—this could be as simple as asking a few members of the target audience to review a draft and incorporate their feedback or as complicated as pilot testing or pre-market testing of an activity or concept.
- Select one key activity such as a website that has broad reach but can be developed with relatively few dollars—and spend the time to develop it well.
- Develop messages that resonate with the target audience.
- Provide credible information.
- Provide value-added resources/information (e.g. “How to” items such as recipe booklets).

Organization mandate

Single-purpose organizations that are created as a source of nutrition education are dedicated to that goal and their entire budget would be directed to communicating nutrition and health information. However, even within a multi-purpose organization—which has competing priorities that need to be addressed on the website as well as within the organization—nutrition activities can be conducted in an effective manner if they have:

- organizational support and buy-in for the communications activities;
- dedicated resources to conduct the activities;
- an activity, such as a website, that has a clear message which resonates with the audience; and
- an opportunity to effectively partner with other organizations.

In conclusion, health claims on packages and in advertising can be an effective way of increasing consumer awareness of a food product's health benefits; however, long-term impact on purchase behaviour is unknown. As a result, alternatives such as websites, print and electronic resources, and partnerships can be used to enhance consumer awareness of the health benefits of a food product and potentially reach more people. Following some best practices can maximize the chance of success.

Contact us to learn more about regulations for health claims, novel foods and ingredients.

Food Regulatory Issues Division

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada
1341 Baseline Road, Tower 5, 2nd Floor
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0C5
Email: info.FRID-DEIRA@agr.gc.ca
www.agr.gc.ca/food-regulatory-issues

The Government of Canada has prepared this report based on primary and secondary sources of information. Although every effort has been made to ensure that the information is accurate, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada assumes no liability for any actions taken based on the information contained herein.

© Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, 2010

Cat. No. A72-96/2010E-PDF

ISBN 978-1-100-17248-4

AAFC No. 11287E

Electronic version available at www.agr.gc.ca/food-regulatory-issues

Aussi offert en français sous le titre : *Pratiques exemplaires en matière de promotion des bienfaits des aliments pour la santé : Aperçus d'une analyse environnementale.*