

Negativity remains over omega-3

07/02/2006 - **Omega-3 may be a hot topic on everyone's lips, but the industry still needs to overcome negative perceptions about traditional sources such as oily fish, according to research analysis by Frost and Sullivan.**

Such perceptions include the notion that [omega-3](#) is difficult to work with as it is so unstable, that the end product will be tainted by a fishy taste and smell, and that there may be quality and safety issues connected with fish oils.

These may once have presented functional food formulators with real problems, but technical advances mean that they need do so no longer.

The report, entitled *End-user analysis of the global omega-3 PUFA market*, draws attention to fish oils that are specifically manufactured for use in functional food and beverage products, without affecting the functional and sensory properties.

Microencapsulation has proved a major step forward, since the omega-3 oil is contained within tiny capsules which protect it from oxidation.

In 2004 the European market was valued at US\$194 million (around €160 million), more than three-quarters of which was generated by marine oils. Algae-derived products by the likes of Nutrinova and Martek Biosciences made up 19 per cent of the market.

[Frost](#) and Sullivan has predicted that the omega-3 market will grow at rates of 8 per cent on average to 2010.

It expects the growth potential to be hampered somewhat by legislation in some countries that prevents manufacturers from making any health claims on the packaging of functional food products.

However increased consumer awareness about the benefits is expected to mitigate the effects of this legislation. As well as media reports about new studies linking omega-3 to heart health and cognitive function, in the US the FDA extended its qualified health claim linking DHA and EPA to a reduced risk of coronary heart disease in September 2004.

Another major challenge is competition from within the omega-3 area. Some companies are choosing to use less expensive vegetable sources instead of marine or algae-derived omega-3, even though there is evidence to suggest that it is not as bioavailable for the human body.

"There is very little legislation that exists to differentiate between short- and long-chain sources," wrote the author of the analysis.

The report also suggests some ways in which companies can differentiate their omega-3 offering from that of their competitors – for example by creating awareness around their brand, or adding value by blending it with other ingredients or vitamins.