

Omega-3 reality check

25-Aug-2008 - **The market predictions for omega-3 products are endlessly buoyant but a closer look at the state of play reveals very few omega-3 functional foods and beverages have moved beyond niche sales levels.**

Launches continue coming thick and fast, but in most cases sales are lagging seriously behind.

For an apparently booming sector selling itself on heart and brain health, it's all a little strange. Figures point to healthy omega-3 supplements sales but the same cannot be said for the foods and beverages industry.

If sales figures for the thousands of omega-3 products launched globally in the past five years or so are tallied, the number of successful mainstream products is scant, according to *New Nutrition Business* magazine.

A milk in Spain (Puleva) that has been on-market for the best part of ten years and achieved sales of more than €100m. An omega-3 bread in Australia has gained more than 10 per cent of the sliced white bread market.

Er, that's about it really...

Healthy halo

A little baffling, given the evidence that points to an ingredient, be it marine or plant-sourced, that pretty much does what it says on the tin. The studies are many – heart health, brain health, degenerative disorder battling and more.

There's a term in the functional foods business called the 'healthy halo' and omega-3 has it. Public awareness + clinical backing + willingness to purchase = healthy halo.

Market analysts like Frost and Sullivan continue to publish buoyant figures and point to the fact the industry remains in its infancy and that niche level sales and product withdrawals are to be expected as the industry finds its feet.

Frost valued the European market at €187.8 million in 2007, and expected it to be worth €820m by 2014, equivalent to a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 23.6 per cent.

Sea changes

Technical advances mean omega-3s can be incorporated into most food groups with marginal formulation issues. You can get your omega-3s in all manner of products from milks to juices to breads to yoghurts to eggs.

For a mainstream food industry in the midst of a health and wellness sea change, it would appear the perfect ingredient, and many have taken it onboard.

Deeper seizures

But the reality is murkier as indicated by statements being made by some industry analysts as well as those companies that have tried and failed with certain omega-3 products.

High profile products from major food companies such as Unilever and Muller have been canned.

Muller's own research found consumers:

- Lacked trust in the product's efficacy

- Perceived health claims as hype rather than science-driven
- Thought products contained ineffectual dose levels

Omega-3 math

Getting your omega-3 dose from food is not as simple as it sounds.

Most of the hype has centred around fish-oil derived omega-3s rather than the grain-based cousins that possess ALA (alpha-linolenic acid), the omega-3 form that doesn't have the heart and brain health cache of marine-derived DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) and EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) ingredients.

It may be that the public doesn't want a fish extract in its bread or its yoghurt.

Then there is dosage. For mostly cost and formulation issues, omega-3 foods deliver low doses of EPA and DHA. The idea being consumers can gain efficacious daily doses of omega-3s from multiple food sources as well as any oily fish they may eat or omega-3 supplements they may take

Let the consumers do the math. With daily recommended levels at about 500mg of EPA and DHA per day and most foods having less than 100mg per serving, there is a bit of adding up to do.

Which any marketer worth his fish oil will tell you is something consumers don't like to do.

It might just all be a bit too hard for most consumers.

Perhaps a juncture has been reached where functional foods companies need to rethink their approach to omega-3 food fortification along with the manner in which these foods are communicated.