

Consumer analysts: Spread word that sugar comes from a farm

ASHEVILLE, N.C. – Informing consumers that sugar comes from a plant raised on a farm and should be part of a “balanced” diet has more appeal to consumers than telling them it is OK to eat sugar in moderation, consumer analysts said here last week at the American Sugar Alliance’s International Sweetener Symposium.

With a Nutrition Facts Label that contains a line for “added sugars” becoming mandatory in January and the Food and Drug Administration telling consumers they should limit added sugars to 10% of daily caloric intake, the sugar industry is searching for ways to give convince consumers it is still OK to eat sugar, Courtney Gaine, the president and CEO of the Sugar Association, said as she opened a panel discussion on whether it is possible to increase consumer confidence in sugar.



Courtney Gaine



Amber Wilcox and David Lockwood of Mintel Consulting

David Lockwood, a director of Mintel Consulting, said consumers are now interested in “wellness” rather than diet, and that they feel empowered by the information they have but also overwhelmed by it.

Consumers believe they need to restrict sugar intake, but online 85% write positively about it, said Amber Wilcox, a Mintel consultant.

Consumers have been told to eat foods, particularly sugar-containing products, in “moderation,” but that term “feels vague and negative and reinforces the sense of harm,” Afshin Mohamadi, a partner in Quadrant Strategies. A better message, he added, is that “Living healthy is about balance.”

But Mohamadi also warned the industry that consumers do not want to hear from the sugar industry that it’s healthy to eat more sugar.

Although industry executives like to point out that people need sugar for their muscles and brains to function, the message that sugar has “utility in the human body” is “a secondary message,” he said.



Afshin Mohamadi

The fact that sugar comes from a plant is a positive for consumers, Mohamadi said. The terms “real” and “pure” create positive associations in consumers’ minds, he said. Consumers believe that honey is “the most healthy and natural” of sweeteners and that high-fructose corn syrup is “not real.” Only 30% think sugar is “naturally grown,” he said.

Mohamadi said that a key message should be that “sugar comes from a plant – like sugar beets or sugar cane. It’s grown on a farm and it’s minimally processed.”

A message about balance should come second, with a message about utility in the body the least important of the three.

But Mohamadi warned that the industry should not expect a positive message about sugar from the government to have much impact.

He said a focus group participant who believes that he eats a balanced diet said, “A lot of things like the USDA are too money-driven – they’re profit-driven at the end of the day. You see even on the websites for diabetes and all those other things, they say ‘Eat these foods, it’s better for diabetes or heart disease’... then you go further down and it says it’s sponsored by all these companies ... So, a lot of it is based off of money, in my opinion.”

Presentations

- [Courtney Gaine, president and CEO of The Sugar Association - “Increasing Consumer Confidence in Sugar: Is it Possible?”](#)
- [Afshin Mohamadi, partner, Quadrant Strategies - “How to Talk About Sugar: Messaging Strategy”](#)
- [David Lockwood and Amber Wilcox of Mintel Consulting - “Increasing Consumer Confidence in Sugar: Is it Possible?”](#)

