

HFMA Bulletin

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COVID-19: consumer behaviour and supplements

Twelve months ago, none of us could have predicted the unprecedented changes we would experience in our day-to-day lives. The pandemic has had a profound effect on the global economy, businesses and consumers. It has also brought health and wellbeing into focus more than ever before. While a recent IRI/Spins survey showed the natural products industry continues to outperform conventional products, with a 21.8% rise in health foods and VMS in August alone, it's imperative the industry take steps to understand and address underlying consumer needs to ensure this upswing continues.

Consumers are focusing their buying power on healthy ingredients with an increased awareness of the importance of good nutrition for immune health. The run of food supplements has been exponential with the demand for immune-oriented ingredients skyrocketing. A recent Ipsos-CRN survey showed that 43% of food supplement users have changed their supplement protocols since the start of the pandemic, with 91% of these increasing their supplement intake.

Sales of stress and relaxation supplements are also growing. While many UK workers see the benefits of working from home, 80% feel it's had a negative effect on mental health, according to Nuffield Health.

Key consumer needs our industry could focus on to maintain the momentum include:

Sustainability – Investing in the environment is important for companies. According to The Conference Board Consumer Confidence Survey (in collaboration with Nielsen) over 80% of respondents agree companies should help improve the environment. And 29% of consumers are prepared to pay a premium for brands that contribute to the community, according to the EY Future Consumer Index.

Plant-based ingredients – A recent Attest survey for the Vegan Society showed one in five Brits has cut down on meat during the pandemic. Part of the reason may not be due to lack of availability, but more out of concern for their health, the environment and animal rights. The IRI/Spins report also showed demand for plant-based products had increased.

Clean label – A survey of 1,000 adults in the UK and US commissioned by Ingredient Communications, found 50% were more inclined to buy a product if they recognized all the ingredients on the label. Only 19% said they always recognize all the ingredients – a clear sign manufacturers can do more to gain consumer trust and support their need for greater transparency and simplification of ingredient declarations in supplements.

Supporting local – Despite the rise in online shopping, local and independent UK retailers have benefitted from the sense of community and togetherness created by the pandemic, with more than 75% of adults surveyed in Opinion's latest Retail Tracker agreeing it's important to support local businesses. Nearly two-thirds who have shopped locally during the pandemic say they intend to continue.

As more consumers turn to natural products for immune support and daily wellbeing, it's vital that manufacturers and retailers listen to the needs of the consumer to drive our industry forward. By innovating and supplying quality products that are plant-based, eco-friendly and sustainable, our industry will be able to carry this current momentum forward.

This is the vision for our HealthyDoesIt initiative, which aims to build on renewed consumer awareness about natural products and provide a focus for retailers to engage with consumers.

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