

Snack Foods Raise the Bar with Nutritional Ingredients

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Life is now more fast-paced than ever before. With consumers juggling work, family, leisure and social commitments, food manufacturers need to innovate with appealing offerings to suit an 'on-the-go' lifestyle. The bar market is one area that has risen to the challenge of this growing demand, finding its place in consumers' everyday lives. The popularity of bars has soared in recent years, with the U.S. market value for nutritional health bars growing 14 percent in 2013 to a market size worth \$2.4 billion dollars^[1].

In conjunction with this booming market, consumer trends have driven further innovation and expansion of nutritious food products. Alongside a stronger focus on healthy living, trends in the nutritional bar sector include protein fortification, use of ancient grains and seeds, fiber enhancement and positioning around energy and satiety. Additionally, consumers are becoming increasingly discerning about what is in the foods they purchase and, as a result, there is a call for greater clarity in ingredient labeling as well as a convenient format that fits with busy, active lifestyles. Manufacturers are tasked with producing ingredients that not only promote health and wellness, but which also offer convenience for on-the-go snacking.

Category expansion

Whether in the form of a satisfying granola breakfast bar, a multigrain snack bar for all ages, or a protein-fuelled bar for sports enthusiasts, nutritional cereal bars offer versatility that few other food products can lay claim to. As such, they have found another role outside the everyday snacking arena. In line with consumers' pursuit of a healthy lifestyle, protein bars have exploded onto the mainstream nutrition scene. Manufacturers are now honing in on the potential that this offers, looking closely at the requirements of the mass market while taking inspiration from elite sports performance products.

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The nutritional health bar category is prospering, with an increase in market value from \$565 million in 2008 to \$2.4 billion just five years later^[2]. Protein ingredient experts have seized the opportunity to formulate with innovative ingredients to meet both customer and consumer needs, particularly in the sports and energy arena. Milk and whey proteins offer benefits that make them the dominant choice for the ingredient supplier and consumer alike. Containing all 20 amino acids and high in branched-chain amino acids (BCAAs), whey protein is a complete protein and has a higher biological value than many common protein sources, meaning that the body can absorb it more easily to aid both muscle building and maintenance.

Everyday fortification

The sports nutrition and recovery category is experiencing a buoyant trajectory, however there are opportunities for cereal bars beyond this arena. As consumers become more aware of the benefits of protein, they are looking for fortification in everyday snacks, too, such as granola bars. High sources of protein and fiber help to boost a bar's nutritional profile and ensure a feeling of satiety, therefore acting as an ideal option for a mid-morning or afternoon snack. Not only can the bar itself be fortified with protein, but ingredient suppliers are now creating new ways of upping the protein content of cereal bars.



The rise of grains and

seeds

Ingredient manufacturers may also want to increase the nutrition levels of granola bars using ingredients other than milk and whey proteins. As such, suppliers are now helping to formulate nutritional bars with grains and healthy seeds, such as quinoa, amaranth, sorghum, flaxseed and chia. A portfolio of specialty grains and seeds harnesses the long-recognized nutritional benefits that they bring to bar and bakery applications. Rich in fiber and protein, these ingredients deliver added health benefits, such as ALA omega-3s. Additionally, they provide properties to enhance the texture and eating experience and contribute to sought-after product positionings, for example gluten-free and clean label. Drawing on their 'superfood' status, ingredients derived from chia, sorghum, quinoa and amaranth help to optimize texture, enhance flavor and offer a health and wellness boost to baked goods for a healthy and convenient eating experience.

Meeting manufacturer challenges

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Creating nutritious and flavorsome cereal bars presents manufacturers with several challenges. Due to the nature of the formulation process and ingredients involved, achieving appealing textures while adding protein – and other ingredients – can be a difficult task. Shelf life is an important consideration when adding particular ingredients to a recipe. Manufacturers must ensure that adding sought-after nutritious ingredients does not compromise the taste and texture of the finished product. Quantities of protein must be balanced to create a pleasing organoleptic experience through soft and chewy textures. Ingredient providers can help create innovative products that preserve a desired texture in cereal bars, contribute to a longer shelf life and enhance the overall quality.

Ingredients that offer gum mucilage properties and strong water binding capabilities help to achieve an improved texture and manage moisture content to prevent staling and hardening. Flaxseed-derived ingredients have proven their ability in this area and contribute added value through the high levels of nutrition they provide.

A further challenge is meeting health-conscious consumers' demand for snack bars with reduced sugar. Since minimizing the amount of sugar in foods often leads to a decrease in binding structure – which can have a larger impact on texture and shelf life – manufacturers must reformulate with ingredients that offer binding properties to maintain the sticky, soft food matrix required in bars.

Achievable options

In a flourishing market that shows no sign of slowing down, cereal bar manufacturers should work with experienced functional ingredient providers that offer a range of innovative options to meet customer and consumer demands. As mainstream cereal bars experience increased demand for protein inclusion, manufacturers need to ensure that their products achieve the textures and flavors sought by consumers, while offering an enhanced nutritional profile and a longer shelf life.

Glanbia Nutritionals, a division of Glanbia plc, is an innovator in the expert delivery of science-led ingredients for a broad range of industries. These include fortified foods and beverages, sports nutrition and health & wellness.

[1] Information Resources Inc. Scan data, Dec 2013

[2] Information Resources Inc. Scan data, Dec 2013

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