



Functional Foods: A View from Japan



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Japan as a nation is at the forefront of functional food development, the result of a logical progression in Japan's historical use of functional foods.

Today, the functional food market is estimated to be worth more than \$16 billion, after growing 12% in 2005. Japanese people consume more functional foods than do consumers in any other individual country. As a result, the Japanese functional food market is one of the most advanced and dynamic in the world, and product development activity in Japan is often indicative of future developments in the United States, Europe, and other Asian countries.

Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) must approve all foods or ingredients included within Japan's "foods for specified health use" (FOSHU) listing. Once approved, the food product's package can carry both a specific health claim and the FOSHU label. Other than this, health claims are not permitted.

Benefits of the FOSHU System

Claims about functional foods lie at the heart of the FOSHU system. Four main criteria are checked before approval is granted: 1) shelf life, 2) production and quality control methods, 3) functional effect, and 4) recommended daily dose and clinical trials. FOSHU has encouraged the development of foods that benefit health in general as well as foods that target specific lifestyle health issues. On a positive note, the authoritative nature of the review process and its reviewers has discouraged the development of misleading claims and, consequently, consumers more readily accept the validity of the claims and reliability of the claimants. However, FOSHU regulation is not without its shortcomings.

Shortcomings of FOSHU Regulation

Time to Approval

The FOSHU approval process takes a considerable length of time, anywhere from 6 months to 3 years, in some cases. Consequently, companies may incur considerable cost in pursuing this approach.

Cost

The cost to complete the approval process is typically on the order of US\$1–2 million, with most of the expenditures allocated to clinical trials. These expenses must be recovered in some way, adding substantially to consumer pricing models for these products.

Japanese Perceptions of Yogurt

Though not a cereal food, yogurt provides a good example of how a commonly consumed food can generate an aura of natural health and goodness within the FOSHU environment. Similar image development should be possible with cereal-based foods, as well.

Standard Label Claims

Yogurt is a very popular dairy item in Japan because of consumer perceptions of its health benefits. Very many people consume it on a daily basis, particularly those products with FOSHU approval. The health-benefit label claim for this product is that it maintains "gastrointestinal condition." Similar claims could be made with other products rich in dietary fiber.

Main Health Reasons For Buying Yogurt

Yogurt is used for constipation relief. In the early postwar years, dairy ingredients were considerably less available and various other products were used to make up the shortfall. One such product was agar extract from seaweed, which was used as a stabilizer. This resulted in yogurt with a stiffened texture. In more recent times, agar in yogurt has been used as convenient way to take dietary fiber for constipation relief.

Yogurt is also bought for skin care. The Japanese (women in particular) have a high regard for maintaining good skin condition, that is, skin without sun or other weathering damage. Plain and frozen yogurts are often purchased as an "ingredient for skin conditioning." Yogurt and its components, such as skimmed milk, are viewed as providing a rich nutrient resource of carbohydrates, proteins, minerals, and vitamins to the skin.

Yogurt is thought to alleviate the effects of tobacco and prevent colds. Yogurts that include fruit are often bought for their eye appeal, as well as the indulgence factor. They are also seen as functional foods on the basis of their fruit-derived nutrients, such as vitamin C. This vitamin is perceived as offering immunity against cold infections and mitigating the effects of smoking.

Fermented lactic dairy products and yogurt drinks are commonly purchased to actively counter two major health concerns in Japan today: elevated levels of cholesterol and increasing body fat levels.

FOSHU's Voluntary Status

FOSHU is a voluntary process, and what constitutes "health foods" is not otherwise defined. There is no requirement to apply for FOSHU status in order to market healthy foods. Accordingly, as long as a company avoids making expressly stated claims, it is not prevented from selling such products. This makes it possible to have two companies, one with approval and one without, using the same health ingredient in a product formula to achieve the same functionality. Not only does this penalize the company that invested in obtaining FOSHU approval, it also results in ongoing communication problems with and misunderstandings by consumers.

Informational Quality

It would appear that few if any applications for FOSHU status have ever been declined. They merely grind to a standstill under the relentless pressure of repeated regulatory requests for further information. So, in addition to the already existing uncertainty regarding the lack of definition as to what constitutes a health food, there is additional uncertainty over the extent of the information required to prove a food's healthful qualities. This has the double-whammy effect of unfairly prejudicing genuine examples of healthful foods, while simultaneously permitting the approval of some less-deserving products. This situation is further exacerbated when information supportive of such products is accepted and published by industry trade journals rather than the more independent and scientifically rigorous academic journals.

In short, the FOSHU system does provide a mechanism that allows considerable market development of functional foods, as well as increasing consumer awareness of age- and lifestyle-related health and disease issues. However, one must recognize that FOSHU also suffers some serious deficiencies in its practical application.

An advertisement appeared here
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