

# Consumers Are Seeking Functional Food More Than Ever

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Consumer attitudes toward functional food and beverages are continually evolving, but the COVID-19 pandemic has brought a new focus on the health and wellness benefits that food can provide, said Laurie Demerit, CEO of The Hartman Group. Demerit spoke during an SFA Ask the Experts webinar, Thursday, about the impact of the pandemic on functional food and beverage sales and shared recommendations for food makers looking to get in on this trend.



According to Demerit, COVID has accelerated trends that were already on the horizon before the pandemic, like customer preferences for organic and sustainable food. However, new issues brought on by the pandemic, like a tightening budget or an increased concern about food safety, have influenced the functional category as well. For example, consumers are taking a more proactive stance on their health, looking to what they eat to support physical, mental, and emotional health. In addition, the increase in home cooking has led consumers to seek innovative new recipes and techniques to involve in their routines.

## How to Take Advantage of the Functionality Trend

Consumers are looking to become more empowered and resilient to help propel them through this time of uncertainty. This has resulted in a stronger focus on health and wellness, which will open up new opportunities for functional products of all types. However, it's important to keep in mind that products that lend themselves to health and wellness should also solve for resource constraints like time, energy, and money. "We have to be empathetic to the things that are happening in customers' lives," said Demerit.

In addition, functional products should continue to be in line with other customer concerns, such as sustainability and social justice. "There is a shift from the 'me' to the 'we' mentality," noted Demerit. "Consumers are increasingly seeing conscious consumption as

‘the right way to do business’ rather than just a ‘nice’ thing.”

It’s also important to balance function with familiarity. As functional foods become more accessible, makers should introduce new ingredients and benefits to consumers in a way that is familiar to them. Consumers are looking for ways to make healthy eating easier, but there are still certain categories of food, specifically, the more indulgent ones, that customers aren’t ready to see functional ingredients in.

Most important is taste. Demerit stressed that above all else, functional foods must taste good. Customers feel that functional food and beverages are more natural, tastier alternatives to supplements. The more a food maker can elevate the sensory experience, the more successful a product will be.

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