



FUNCTIONAL FOODS ROUND-UP

Older Australians and high-pressure processing provide opportunities for the functional foods market.

Words by *Ranjan Sharma*

Older Australians – an untapped market?

Australia's ageing population means that growth in consumer spending is increasingly likely to come from older generations. According to Euromonitor¹, despite the tough economic conditions, consumers will continue to spend on products that reduce the signs of ageing yet it seems the Australian food and drink industry continues to overlook the opportunities associated with this population group.

The health complications associated with age are well documented and include poor bone health and osteoporosis, rheumatoid arthritis, compromised heart health, increased hypertension, diabetes and erratic glycaemic response, poor mental health, and Alzheimer's disease. This considerably long list presents an opportunity and a challenge for manufacturers in developing functional foods and drinks with specific health benefits.

A role for functional foods

In 2010, the International Longevity Centre published a report², 'Older people and functional foods: The importance of diet in supporting older people's health; what role for functional foods?'. It reviewed dietary recommendations for older people, looked at consumer behaviour towards functional foods, and asked whether functional foods could play a role in older people's diets.

The report concluded that good nutrition was vital to maintain good health and prevent disease,

and that functional foods could play a significant role including the prevention and management of chronic disease.

Research required

The report also suggested that there was a need for further research into older people and their requirements of functional foods. In addition to strengthening the offerings to this market, manufacturers may also need to undertake a systematic analysis of their needs at home and in independent living villages, hospitals and rest homes, as well as an analysis of the key trends affecting the seniors' health market including functional, anti-ageing and convenience.

Market opportunities

Weight management: Obesity remains a cause of concern for older Australians. Losing weight becomes more challenging as we age and there is a demand for weight management strategies.

Cardiovascular disease: Products such as plant sterols, soy proteins and omega-3 fatty acids have been shown to benefit cardiovascular diseases and presenting them in suitable formats may offer some opportunities.

Gut health: Research suggests that poor gut health may be a main cause of deteriorating health in the elderly. Ingredients such as pre- and probiotics are touted to offer benefits however delivering them to older Australians still remains a challenge.

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD): Although the scientific evidence is limited, various nutrients,

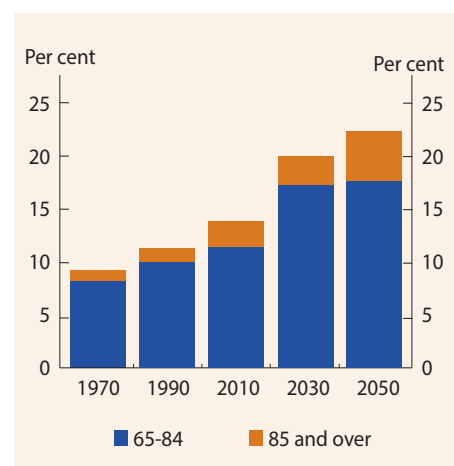


Figure 1: Growth projection for older Australians.

such as omega-3 fatty acids, lower glycemic index diets and, perhaps, some carotenoids, may be employed in diminishing the risk of onset or progression of AMD and these ingredients may provide an opportunity for manufacturers.

Quality of life: Foods and drinks that can aid in improving the quality of life are likely to be welcomed by this market. The desire to look young may lead to development of so-called functional cosmeceutical products (ingredients for youthful skin, hair or nails).

Bone health: Although bone health deteriorates with age, it is not clear if the vast amount of high calcium and vitamin D products have benefited the ageing population. This area may require further scrutiny and a new strategy for new product development.

Convenient food formats

Due to their convenient formats, packaging innovations from the baby food market have potential for the senior citizens' market. Desirable product attributes may include squeezable food pouches of ready-to-eat liquid or semi-solid food ingredients.

There is also a need for packaging formats with appropriate size, shape and weight that allow easy handling and adapt to reduced dexterity by using closures that can be manipulated with one hand without pain or frustration by older people.

Sweeter tastes

A recent study³ by Roy Morgan showed that sweeter spreads such as jams, conserves and marmalade are considerably more popular among older Australians than the rest of the population. According to the study, in the year to June 2013, 47 per cent of Australians aged 65 or over ate jam, conserves or marmalade in an average seven-day period: more than double the percentage of those aged 14-24 (21 per cent). Delivering sweeter functional foods to this segment could be a fresh challenge for food companies.



High pressure processing gains momentum

Recently high pressure processing (HPP) has taken centre stage with Starbucks launching its Evolution Fresh HPP juice products nationwide through its cafe chain in the US.

While many may not understand the technical aspects of HPP, those who have consumed an HPP drink are often certain about one thing – the product offers an extremely high level of freshness and flavour.

Recent product launches of HPP



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include juice and smoothie products like Aartizen and Coldpress in UK and Suja Elements' Green Charge and 100% Raw tea by Harmless Harvest in US.

Since the successful launch of Preshafood juice products in 2010, a number of new HPP products have now been launched in Australia. Examples include Reboot Your Life juices, EasyWay Power smoothie, PressureFresh avocados and guacamole and Moira Mac's ready-to-eat chicken pieces.

To capitalise on the growth of HPP products, the two main HPP machine manufacturers, Avure and Hyperbaric, have recently launched 525L machines – their largest to date.

According to Avure, the 525L delivers an unprecedented 8,135 pounds (3,690 kg) of HPP processing per hour, which is nearly a 200 per cent increase in throughput over the current processing options.

Meanwhile the competition among the manufacturers of equipment for HPP has also increased with the entry of a new manufacturer of HPP equipment in the US. According to reports, Fresher Evolution LLC is launching a complete line of HPP equipment including a 175L, 350L, and 525L in the US market.

According to the company, there are several patent-pending designs on this new line of equipment that will improve operating times, reduce maintenance, improve uptime, and

provide validation of cycles for HPP processing.

The area of HPP is definitely worth watching as the technology offers not only fresher tasting products but also has potential to help launch functional foods and beverages with superior health and nutrition attributes in consumer-friendly packs.

Is sugar tax an answer?

Credit Suisse Research Institute's 2013 study⁴, 'Sugar: Consumption at a Crossroads' found that close to 90 per cent of general practitioners surveyed in the US, Europe and Asia believe excess sugar consumption is linked to the sharp growth in health problems. Credit Suisse Research recommended that a sugar tax is the best way to combat excess sugar consumption.

It appears that global sugar consumption has been on the rise in recent times and is now considerably higher than recommended by the health authorities. American Heart Association recommends six teaspoons of sugar a day for women and nine teaspoons a day for men, but it seems that average sugar consumption globally is 17 teaspoons or higher. The US tops the sugar consumption levels with on average 40 teaspoons of sugar – primarily coming from sugar-sweetened soda.

Although research is yet to prove conclusively that sugar is the leading cause of obesity, type II diabetes


or metabolic syndrome, there is considerable pressure from health and consumer groups for mandatory control and taxing sugar.

The debate on taxing sugar or so called "soda tax" on beverages such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi has been around for many years with no clear mandate from consumers, processors or regulators.

Concerning growth in the incidence of obesity and associated health conditions have reignited this debate and led to some countries imposing a compulsory sugar tax. France imposed a sugar tax on beverages in 2011 while Mexico is currently debating whether to place a special tax on sugary soft drink.

While the long-term impact of a sugar tax is yet unknown, Denmark repealed a similar tax on saturated fat and cancelled plans for a sugar tax earlier this year as a result of its negative effect on businesses and the fact that consumers found other ways to purchase the products.

Australian health organisations including Diabetes Australia, Cancer Council and National Heart Foundation started a campaign to impose tax on soft drinks in Australia earlier this year. Grocery councils in both Australia and New Zealand have strongly opposed such taxes given the insufficient evidence for a link between sugar and health concerns.

The bottom line is that the debate on regulating sugar is likely to continue; meanwhile consumers need to take responsibility for their daily intake of sugars rather than blaming the food industry for excess sugar in beverages. 

Ranjan Sharma is the editor of the market intelligence newsletter, Functional Foods Weekly, www.functionalfoods.biz.

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