

Classroom Exercise

Trendy Toy Turned Trendy Food

Chia Pet is a classic toy that has captured the interests of children and adults alike for the past 33 years. The toys are comprised of uniquely shaped pots—some resembling action figures, animals, and presidents—and chia seeds that simulate hair or fur when sprouted. Chia Pets often end up as gifts, and promotion and sales of the toy are highest during the holiday season. Consequently, “Ch-Ch-Ch-Chia,” the catchy jingle used in marketing the toy, popularized Chia Pet as a recognizable household name. Despite the long history of Chia Pet sales, it wasn't until recently that marketers began promoting the nutritional benefits of chia seeds for consumption.

In the past few years the number of consumers who recognize chia seeds as more than just part of a toy, and instead as a “superfood” has grown exponentially. Food makers responded to this added interest by positioning chia seeds as a healthy addition to food. The percentage of new product introductions that include chia seeds grew from 4% in 2009 to 55% in 2013. The influx of new and relabeled chia seed products and endorsements from celebrities like Dr. Oz helped chia seeds attain a “superfood” status among health minded shoppers. The high interest in chia seeds created new opportunities to turn ordinary food into a perceived super health food, simply by adding chia seeds. Marketers realized that chia seeds offered a lucrative way to improve the perceived quality of foods, even though very few actually knew what was in a chia seed or how it may contribute to a healthy diet.

Although interests in chia seeds have been growing for the past few years, the foods' rise in stardom was not without problems. In June 2014, *Bloomberg Business* released an article linking chia seeds to a salmonella outbreak. Later, in August 2014, The Food & Drug Administration and Centers for Disease Control reported that 31 individuals had become infected with salmonella from consuming organic sprouted chia seed powder. Immediately following the release of the *Bloomberg Business* article, Google tracked a steady drop in chia seed searches that lasted through the end of the year. In spite of the negative press, the next year brought revived interests in the seed and a sharp rise in Google searches. In fact, interest in chia seeds was higher than that before salmonella was linked to the chia seed powder months earlier. Consumers are also increasingly making efforts to learn more about the potential health benefits of chia seeds. “Chia seeds benefits” ranks highly among Google search queries.

Marketers are giving careful consideration to the way chia seeds are portrayed in advertising. Instead of claiming unsubstantiated health benefits, food marketers have focused on promoting accurate claims about the raw components of chia seeds, including the omega 3 and protein content. Indeed, chia seeds have an impressive nutrient profile and many acknowledge that the seed can be a useful food additive. Critics, however, claim that the bioavailability of chia seeds is low, meaning that the body only effectively utilizes a fraction of the nutrients contained in the seed. Furthermore, there is limited research studying the safety and efficacy of the seed, and what little research exists is largely inconclusive. For the time being, marketers will have to stick to the current strategy of promoting the nutritional content of chia seeds, rather than specifically citing how or if those nutrients will improve health. Regardless, this limitation doesn't seem to be slowing down the growing popularity of the transformed Chia Pet turned into a trendy "superfood."

Questions

1. Should food companies invest in more research to investigate health benefits of chia seeds?
2. How can marketers better position chia seeds as a healthy food additive?
3. How do Chia Pets influence interests in chia seeds?

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