

Food for thought

Contributed by TNS
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The rapid economic development and social changes in China are creating a special context for promotion of health and fitness

Fried chicken and overwork

Economic development normally leads to a richer diet, and the average intake of meat products in China increased more than two fold between 1982 and 2002. The intake of cooking oil increased nearly three fold in the same period. There are 2000 KFCs in China and a new one opens every other day. McDonald's has also been growing at the rate of 100 new outlets a year. It is not surprising, therefore, that as in many other developing countries, the naturally trim Chinese are beginning to show signs of obesity and it is making them worried about their health. Research done by TNS suggests that 40% of young urban Chinese women consider themselves to be overweight.

Price of stress

The current lifestyle of the urban Chinese further accentuates the concern, as they feel that work-related toil and stress takes a heavy toll on them, further compounded by the fact that the long and often irregular working hours force them into a lifestyle of irregular and poor quality meals with significant impact on their health. In fact many urban consumers describe themselves as suspended in a state of subhealth – not sick enough to go to a doctor (or take a day off from work!) but not well enough to live with zest and vigour.

Concern for health and wellness

Body and mind are inextricably intertwined in this view of health – leading to the broader concept of health and wellness. Health is not merely a smooth functioning of body parts, but preservation of youth, beauty and zest for life. This significant concern for health among urban Chinese is reflected in a number of ways and offers a number of marketing opportunities. Natural food and exercise are considered as the two biggest contributors to health and the consumers are paying increasing attention to these aspects. The breadth of foods consumed in China is large and specific properties are attributed to specific foods. Carp fish soup is said to increase lactation while yams are thought to help in digestion. A happy mind is not only a reflection of health but a contributor to it and positive thinking is considered as much a contributor to good health as nutritious food. For exercise taijiquan is still practiced though it now has to compete with aerobics from the West and yoga from India, which are widely offered by a rapidly growing health and fitness industry.

Health and wellness products

While the increased consumption of junk food is an inevitable result of increasing incomes, urbanization and westernisation, simultaneously there is clear evidence of increasing concern for health. In fact the frequent "forced" consumption of junk food, makes it all the more important that compensation and balance are found in wiser choices made elsewhere. A whole new market has been created for yoghurts, entirely on the platform of health. Sugarless green tea and wulong tea (specially promoted for slimming benefits), as well as other products promoted on the platform of naturalness or absence of preservatives, are rapidly increasing in importance. We expect an increasing tendency of consumers to opt for healthier alternatives and increased opportunities for food products which offer this choice.

Market for health supplements

The market for health supplements is huge – nearly a quarter of urban Chinese adults have bought a health supplement in the past 12 months. The array of health products and solutions is mind boggling with Western vitamin supplements competing with traditional Chinese remedies and the exotica, including donkey hide glue and sheep embryo essence. Many of them promote themselves with strident advertising on prime media (as mentioned in another article in this booklet, four of China's top eight TV advertisers are product brands associated with health or nutritional supplements). These are often rather curiously promoted – for instance gifting to the elderly and the convalescent (with one product called Naobaijin's elderly spokesmen proclaiming that his Chinese New Year they will except no gift but Naobaijin).

Understanding the specific concern

Clearly, the concern for health and wellness is in ascendance in China and marketers need to carefully monitor further movements in consumer attitudes, which are likely to move them towards healthier choices. In addition, while the concern for health is nearly universal, the specific nature of the concern and the solution a consumer is seeking differs from person to person. Health is as much an emotional concern as a physical one and consumer decisions are based on a complex

set of considerations. A strong concern among young and middle aged women, for instance, is that ill-health will hasten the onset of old age and a loss of beauty and youth. Middle-aged men on the other hand worry about the pressures of the job and the stress of the competitive world. The elderly, more and more living alone, are naturally concerned about continuing physical mobility and independence. The need clearly exists for products to take a segmented look at the market and offer specific solutions to specific segments.