

Shopping for health

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The traditionally health-conscious Chinese continue to seek the freshest food while convenience products are also gaining popularity

Chinese are traditionally highly health conscious. Four of China's top eight TV advertisers are product brands associated with health or nutritional supplements. Sanchine, Gaizhonggai, Hutong and Golden Partner sit alongside major food or personal products FMCG brands Olay, KFC, Colgate and Crest. These are significant investments in promoting health and "given that it is customary in China to give nutritional supplements as gifts when visiting friends and family" such investments are easily justified.

Research from TNS reveals a clear consumer focus on health when buying food. Nationally, nearly 80% said that when purchasing groceries, health is their main consideration. That awareness extends to the content of food products, with more than 78% saying they worry about food additives. Almost 60% claim they would pay a higher price for healthier foods.

Healthy choice

This motivation to eat healthily sustains the enormous value Chinese place on fresh food. Around the world, we all like fresh food. But in Chinese culture, freshness is valued far more than most non-Chinese could ever imagine. The traditional Chinese "wet market" serves this long-held need. Fish, for example, are kept live in glass tanks and the customer selects his or her "catch". Staff kill the fish and wrap it, allowing the customer to go home knowing that the evening meal is as fresh as if they had caught the food themselves. At the meat section, meat is freshly cut, not pre-packed. Fresh vegetables are de rigeur.

Fresh daily

Chinese people want to buy fresh food every day. Ironically, the place where Chinese consumers can best satisfy this traditional

need is in the ultra-modern environment of a hypermarket. Step into a hypermarket in Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu or Guangzhou "any of China's big cities" and the odds are you'll find a traditional "wet market" inside. Is this just No, it's smart marketing. The companies that run China's new hypermarkets understand the power of "fresh" and on meeting this consumer demand helps to boost traffic significantly. In May 2008, TNS data demonstrated that 74% of Shanghai households bought fresh food from a hypermarket over the previous 8 weeks. Those same consumers had visited

a hypermarket to buy fresh food every 1.6 days. But in only 1 out of their 5 last trips to a hypermarket, did they buy any non-food

consumer goods. It was the fresh food that pulled them in to the store.

But there's a trade off going on between health and convenience, as people accommodate modern lifestyles. TNS data shows that 58% of consumers in China want to prepare foods that require less time, and that 21% rely heavily on convenience foods to make cooking simple and easy. Some 31% of housewives say they want to spend more time on leisure and only 33% say they shop around to find the cheapest price.

Frozen food

One measure of this trend towards convenience is the growing popularity of frozen food. In a TNS Worldpanel China index showing how quickly certain food categories are outpacing average growth, frozen food is ahead of the average food category by 59%. Another measure is the growth for all types of tea (including loose tea), which is 84% ahead of the average and mainly driven by tea powders. Innumerable health benefits are attributed to Chinese tea, yet tea bags and tea powder are gaining popularity quickly and underlining the appeal of convenience. Will modern consumer packaged products like these ever replace the traditional way of making a time-honoured beverage in China? Only time will tell.