

Breaking News on Food & Beverage Development - North America

Food safety worries makes consumers label-savvy

By Chris Jones

3/28/2008- **US consumers are increasingly turning to the information on their food labels amid the growing incidence of food safety scares, according to the Hartman Group.**

Speaking during a conference of food industry executives organised by the Food Institute, Hartman's marketing communications manager Kate Peringer said that the media coverage of food scares had made consumers keener than ever to *"buy American"*.

"There's been a lot of scares in the last year involving tainted goods from other countries, China has had a considerable number of problems in this arena," she said.

That was why 75 per cent of consumers interviewed by Hartman said that Country of origin labeling (COOL) should be mandatory, with only eight per cent in disagreement, Peringer said.

"American consumers are very interested as to where their food is coming from, as well as the source of the different ingredients within these products," she added.

Sixty per cent of consumers said that it was somewhat or very important to know the source of the ingredients in the food they eat, according to Hartman's data.

"Things like dairy, produce, meat and seafood - they want to know where these ingredients are coming from, and I think that that is a very important thing to consider [as a food processor or formulator] if you are importing some of these products," Peringer said.

"The media has done a great job of publicizing these scares, and even deaths that have happened across the country, and consumers are on heightened alert."

"They want to know 'Where are my products coming from?'"

Peringer added that a relatively small number of consumers had also gone a step further and were buying only food produced in their local region, since they believed that this made the food safer.

Media reports of contaminated food from China have been growing steadily over the last year or so - Democratic presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton even mentioned it in one of her campaign speeches. These, coupled with other reports about the apparent lack of sufficient resources for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to detect contaminated food has made consumers much more aware about what they are eating.

Not, of course, that food from America is necessarily any safer. Last month the US Department of Agriculture forced US meat packers Hallmark/Westland to recall thousands of products after allegations that cattle were not being treated properly and that there was a serious risk of contamination.

And Peringer had one final comment on labeling and consumer perceptions of 'good' and 'bad' food.

"One thing our research has shown is that if consumers cannot understand or pronounce an ingredient on the food label, then they will generally consider it a bad," no matter where it comes from.

"We recommend that food formulators use ingredients that are simple, clean and easy if they want to have consumers' confidence."