Rising to the Gluten-Free Challenge

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In recent years, the gluten-free market has exploded from what was considered a passing fad to a full-blown health movement. According to the *Los Angeles Times* [1], the demand for gluten-free products is projected to expand by 28 percent each year, topping $6.6 billion by 2017.

What is responsible for the continued growth of the gluten-free category is debatable. Some health experts suggest heightened awareness of celiac disease and gluten sensitivity is leading to more diagnoses, while others are avoiding gluten in an effort to lose weight or improve general health. Whatever the case, it is clear that gluten-free is here for the long haul.

Not only are gluten-free products gaining popularity, but they soon may be required in certain facilities, including universities and schools. In December 2012, Lesley University [2] in Massachusetts settled a lawsuit after at least one student complained to the federal government that the school would not offer exemptions from meal plans even if students had health conditions such as celiac disease.

The settlement is the first to come as the result of connecting a food allergy or intolerance with the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), and experts say that this case could set a precedent for other universities and schools subject to the ADA. Some even claim that restaurants could be held accountable in certain situations.

As gluten-free begins to be seen as a basic accessibility issue rather than simply a diet preference, it is increasingly important for food companies to develop more gluten-free options to meet the rising need of consumers. But developing a gluten-free version of an existing product or an entirely new gluten-free line can be a tough challenge.

Cutting gluten from a product's ingredient list is only the beginning of the process. Due to the potential for cross-contamination, it is imperative that manufacturers ensure all equipment and employees are devoid of the substance throughout the entire production process. Manufacturers using equipment previously utilized for gluten-containing items essentially have two options: replace existing machinery with new systems or dismantle existing machinery and thoroughly clean it to remove all traces of gluten, which may prove more difficult than may be expected.

Kinnikinnick Foods [3] is an example of the dedication required to prepare used equipment for a gluten-free line. When the company purchased used equipment for its gluten-free waffle line, workers spent four weeks dismantling the machinery and clearing any traces of wheat left behind by the previous user.

In addition to removing gluten from the processing area, manufacturers also have to comply with any gluten-free regulations, which are currently lacking in the U.S. The FDA began the process to define "gluten-free" in 2007, but the agency is still reviewing outside input on the proposed definition before enacting any guidance for the food industry.

Food manufacturers searching for gluten-free guidance can turn to certification programs, such as Quality Assurance International [4] (QAI) and the Gluten-Free Certification Organization [5] (GFCO), which offer official gluten-free labels to qualifying products. Programs like these review products, inspect facilities, test product samples for gluten-free integrity and ensure ongoing compliance to provide both food companies and consumers with peace of mind.

Companies willing to invest time and money into going gluten-free can expect to reap rewards as the market continues to grow. Approximately 18 percent of adults embraced gluten-free diets in 2012, up from 15 percent in 2010. Products already prevalent in gluten-free aisles include cereals, granola bars and baked goods, but there are still plenty of opportunities for new gluten-free items as shoppers look for more variety in their restricted diet.

While producing gluten-free products poses logistical and regulatory challenges for food manufacturers, it also places them in a unique position to meet an important public health need and get a head start in a fast-growing market.

Is your company embracing the growing gluten-free market? Please feel free to comment below or let me know at lindsey.jahn@advantagemedia.com [6].

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