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Store Chain's Test Concludes That Nutrition Sells

By ANDREW MARTIN

A grocery store chain based in Maine declared success yesterday for a year-old experiment in using a rating system to direct customers to healthier food items.

The chain, the Hannaford Brothers Company, said that the program had a major impact on steering purchases in the expansive packaged-food section of the store, including cereals, soups and breads.

The system that Hannaford developed, called Guiding Stars, rated the nutritional value of the grocery items in the store on a scale of zero to three stars, with three representing the most nutritious products.

After analyzing a year's worth of sales data, Hannaford found that customers tended to buy leaner cuts of meat. Sales of ground beef with stars on their labels increased 7 percent, and sales of chicken that had a star rating rose 5 percent. Sales of ground beef labeled with no stars dropped by 5 percent, while sales of chicken that had a zero-star rating declined 3 percent.

Similarly, sales of whole milk, which received no stars, declined by 4 percent, while sales of fat-free milk (three stars) increased 1 percent.

Sales of fruits and vegetables, however, remained about the same as they did before the ratings were introduced. All fresh produce received stars.

"I have to say, I'm thrilled," said Lisa A. Sutherland, assistant professor of pediatrics and a nutrition scientist at Dartmouth Medical School, who was part of an advisory panel that devised Hannaford's system. "They were pretty much what I would have expected with an objective system that wasn't designed to promote or negate one food or another."

Hannaford, which is owned by the Delhaize Group of Belgium, operates 160 grocery stores in the Northeast.

The Hannaford program was introduced at a time when many food companies were promoting their own labels to denote healthier choices. For instance, PepsiCo has Smart Spot items, Kraft offers Sensible Solution, and Unilever promotes My Choice, all involving foods that meet certain nutrition guidelines.

But when Hannaford ran its 25,500 products through the formula devised by its advisory board, many products that were marketed as healthful received no stars, usually because they had too much salt or sugar. Twenty-eight percent of the items in the store received one star or more.

Hannaford's formula used data from a product's nutrition facts panel and the ingredients list, and credited a food for having vitamins and minerals, fiber and whole grains. The system took points away for trans fats, saturated fats, cholesterol, added sugars and added sodium. Caren Epstein, a spokeswoman for Hannaford, said she was not surprised that the Guiding Stars system was most successful with packaged goods, which include cereals, soup and pasta. Those items, which are typically sold in the center of the grocery store, are often festooned with health claims, making it hard for customers to figure out which one is best.

"When you are looking at 100 different cereals, that's where you need help," she said. "People already knew that fruits and vegetables are good for them. This isn't exactly a news flash."

Hannaford did not provide overall sales data, nor did it say how the sales trends compared with the rest of the industry.

"This is probably positive news," said Kelly D. Brownell, director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale, who said he would need to see more data before reaching a conclusion. "I'm surprised that providing such little information would make a difference in consumer behavior, but I'm delighted that it does."

Mr. Brownell noted that there is a long history of failure for nutrition education programs, in part because they compete in an environment "that provides massive inducement to eat unhealthy foods." For

instance, he noted that such foods tend to be cheaper than healthful foods and are more heavily marketed.

A survey of Hannaford customers found that 81 percent were aware of the Guiding Stars program, and half of them said they used it “fairly often.”

Sales of packaged-food items labeled with stars grew at two and half times the pace of those without. Sales of breakfast cereals labeled with stars increased three and a half times that of cereal without stars, which showed only a slight rise.

Similarly, sales of frozen dinners with stars on their labels increased at four and a half times the rate of sales of no-starred frozen dinners. Hannaford would not identify specific products or brands that sold better than others.