

When a company drops a controversial ingredient, they're not doing it for your health

May 11 2015, by Beth Skwarecki

Last month, Pepsi announced they were dropping aspartame from their flagship diet drink in the US.

Last week it was Chipotle swearing off GMO ingredients.

Before that, Kraft dropped certain dyes, Subway took the "yoga mat chemical" out of its bread, Gatorade stopped using brominated vegetable oil, and these are just a few of the dubiously health-related but loudly trumpeted food reformulations of recent years.

Companies reformulate their products all the time, but when they make a big announcement about the change, I'm skeptical that it's anything other than a marketing move (or a swap they were going to make anyway, with a convenient reason). It turns out there are reasons, not exactly hidden, to question the do-good intentions of recent reformulations.

Diet Pepsi

I wrote today at Lifehacker about the science behind [Pepsi's shift away from aspartame](#). Short version: there's no reason to believe that [aspartame](#) is dangerous, and people who want to err on the side of caution won't find the replacement sweeteners any more reassuring.

But Pepsi acknowledged that although they were bowing to consumer concerns about safety, they didn't believe the sweetener was unsafe. Sure, it makes sense that a company would be careful not to state that they'd been knowingly poisoning customers (even if that were true). But their actions suggest that [health concerns](#) are a red herring:

- Pepsi's CEO discussed the shift as [part of a conference](#) in which he also explained that sales have been lagging and a nod to consumer demand is part of the strategy to bring sales up.
- Pepsi is only changing the formula for Diet Pepsi and two variations on the drink, and only in the US. Meanwhile, Diet Mountain Dew and Pepsi Max will keep their aspartame, because [consumers aren't complaining specifically about aspartame in those drinks](#).

Chipotle

Dropping GMO ingredients from the Chipotle menu, likewise, can't be based on any serious health concerns. Dan Charles at NPR explains some of the reasons why the move is hypocritical:

- They're keeping sodas, which often include GMO corn syrup.
- They're keeping sodas, which have actual known health risks much larger and more definite than any of the suspected [health risks](#) of GMO products.
- They cite concerns about the pesticide resistance in farming practices associated with GMO soy plants, but are switching away from soy to an oil that, while non-GMO, has very similar pesticide concerns.

It looks like Chipotle is making the switch simply because consumers want it, and it's easy. They're only changing two ingredients: Cooking oil, and corn flour tortillas. If GMO corn and soy were sprinkled across their

menu, would they be as committed to the change?

The bottom line

While giving in to consumer pressure may help a company's bottom line, the implication that it's for health reasons (which is usually not stated outright because, you know, it's usually not based in science) may be a bad thing for scientific understanding among the public. The likes of the #FoodBabeArmy get their concerns addressed without any reference to the actual science involved. (The Food Babe's first objection to Kraft's yellow dye? It's made from petroleum. No, that's not the same as eating asphalt or gasoline. Sorry.)

I understand wanting to change ingredients, but that can happen without a media splash. The neon-colored dyes in Kraft products kind of gross me out too, especially next to the grayish color of the noodles. I'm not concerned for my kids' health, but as I stir the cup (on the days we've bought Kraft's brand instead of Annie's—both end up in our kitchen), I wonder who decided cheese should be this color anyway? And the truth: It was probably because, years ago, consumers liked it better that way.

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Citation: When a company drops a controversial ingredient, they're not doing it for your health (2015, May 11) retrieved 4 July 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-05-company-controversial-ingredient-theyre-health.html>

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