

Supplement registry to aid marketers and retailers

By Steve Mister

From protein powders to herbal formulas, vitamin D to probiotics, the dietary supplement aisle at the drug store is growing. According to *Nutrition Business Journal*, the dietary supplement market grew by 6% last year as more and more consumers express interest in natural health options and take more active roles in their own wellness and prevention. Both baby boomers and Millennials are avid users of supplements, with 71% of Americans using these products.

At the same time, though, dietary supplements have been under increasing scrutiny. Last year, the New York attorney general announced his misguided investigation of herbal supplements using DNA testing, and, although the results of that report have been widely discredited, it did ignite a new conversation around the quality and contents of supplements. Along with increased enforcement of federal regulations by the Food and Drug Administration, and new attention from class-action attorneys, the growing focus of state AGs has reminded supplement retailers that they do indeed have exposure for the products they put on the shelf.

The dietary supplement industry is not without its problems. In the past five years, FDA has identified hundreds of products labeled as dietary supplements but containing undis-



Supplement OWL will offer two levels of product information.

closed illegal drugs inside the bottle. Separately, the temptation to cut corners entices some companies to purchase sub-standard ingredients, leading to economically motivated adulteration — products that don't contain the dosage amounts or purity of ingredients listed on the labels. And six years after the good manufacturing practices (GMP) regulations became fully effective, FDA still finds far too many firms are not implementing these requirements to assure safe and well-made supplements.

So how is a retailer to know which supplement products are worthy of being offered to their valued customers? This dilemma has vexed both retailers and responsible supplement marketers. When well made, legally compliant, and responsibly marketed products compete with less reputable items for shelf space and consumer attention, responsible marketers are disadvantaged and retailers

invite the criticism that the supplements aisle really is "buyer beware."

The first step to addressing this problem is to define the universe of legitimate dietary supplements. Too often, FDA wrings its hands and complains it doesn't even know how many products are in the market, what ingredients are in them,

contain which ingredients; who markets them; whether they are certified by a third party for purity and identity; and whether the facility in which they are manufactured has been audited by a third party for compliance with those GMP regulations? A supplement library that lists each product by name and provides basic information across all brands and categories?

Soon, there will be. The Council for Responsible Nutrition (CRN), the leading trade association for the dietary supplement and functional food industry, has partnered with UL, a global independent science safety company, to create a new registry of dietary supplements that will answer those questions. Branded the Supplement OWL (Online Wellness Library), the product registry is in its second phase of beta testing, and it is anticipated to be publicly ac-

dinary ingredients per serving, contact information for the distributor, and third-party "seals" or certification provided on the label. Registry users will be able to search this tier to identify products they are interested in, evaluate label information, and compare similar items.

Tier 2, which will be available later in 2017, will be accessible to retail buyers, wholesalers and other industry members on a "permission only" basis. Product marketers can choose to allow all retailers who register with the database to have access or only those retailers they choose to permit. This second tier will provide further product information such as product specification sheets, the evidence supporting labeled attributes (like Kosher or non-GMO certifications) and confirmation their facility has been audited for GMP compliance.

All this information will provide regulators with more transparency for dietary supplements and make it easier for retailers to navigate the marketplace when selecting products for their stores. Should companies marketing products with illegal ingredients choose to enter them into the registry, FDA will have access to that company's manufacturing and packaging facility contact information—something which will be mandatory for all companies entering products into the Supplement OWL and available on a confidential basis to FDA.

Dietary supplement companies supporting the Supplement OWL recognize that this step alone will not solve all the problems in the industry, but by demonstrating more transparency, by allowing examination of labeling and by providing supporting documentation for label representations, the Supplement OWL begins to hold marketers more accountable. It allows FDA to search for problematic ingredients and offers retailers a new decision point for improving their images as responsible vendors.

Chain drug retailers can help accelerate industry usage and acceptance of the Supplement OWL among manufacturers by incorporating a quick referral to the registry as part of their purchasing process. Your store's participation in this initiative is sure to benefit your customers who want to make more informed decisions about their wellness and prevention purchases. The Supplement OWL just might be the one library where everyone's talking.

For more information about the Supplement OWL, visit www.supplementowl.org.

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