

Choosing your nutrition Software

By Anny Dentener

Decided you need some software to get through the time consuming job of calculating nutrition labelling for all your foods? After all, under the now gazetted ANZFA Food Standards Code (www.anzfa.govt.nz) only a few will have the luxury of an exemption. So what is available to make your job easier, and what should you look for before deciding to buy? Be prepared for a compromise on features and cost since none of the packages will give you everything you ideally would like.

A search for “nutrition software” on the web yields hundreds of links. A closer look at the results quickly reveals that most are targeted at consumers’ health and fitness needs. An example is NutriGenie (<http://members.aol.com/nutrigenie>).

The 1998 review by the USDA Food and Nutrition Information Centre (www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/software/introsoft.html) shows many options, but only a few target the food industry. A survey of 87 professional users is reported at www.nuconnexions.com/ProfNutrSurv with a downloadable report. Linked to the Nutribase website (www.nutribase.com) are the articles “Nutrition software, 101 Questions to ask before you buy” (February 2000) and “The impact of nutrition software and the Internet” (January 2001). This is recommended reading! The first article also contains a list of the main

professional nutrition software packages worth looking at.

Most of these packages however are targeting dietitians, health/clinical and food service professionals. This could well suit the needs of a nutritionist/dietician working in the food industry, but may be limited for the requirements of a product developer. The only packages currently focussing on product developers are Genesis R&D and Food Works. Genesis R&D (ESHA Research: www.esha.com) has a large US/Canadian database of foods and speciality food industry ingredients. Apart from calculating nutrients, nutrient ratios and costs, it can generate a standard US format label with the %RDA. Price for a single license is US\$2,999. Their dietician package Food Processor VII sells at US\$599. A demo is available from their website.

Food Works (Xyris: www.xyris.com.au) claims to be the leading Australian and New Zealand nutrition software. It is the only package with databases for Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and the Pacific Islands, and is marketed in New Zealand by Crop & Food Research. It is suitable for both dietitians and for “recipe” development and calculations for food technologists. Current cost is NZ\$945. A 30 day fully functional package can be downloaded from their website or you can request a demo CD.

Apart from budget considerations what are the critical parameters for a product developer to look at when making a choice? Critical performance areas will be partly dependent on the type of food you work with. For instance if working with baked products an easy adjustment for the moisture loss in the oven is necessary. In terms of nutrition claims, information both for a serving and per 100 g or ml (with density conversion) will be needed. An output in terms of % RDI is also desirable, and preferably the RDI/RDA settings can be adjusted to suit exporters. Information on fatty acids and sugars plus the information on what ingredient contributes how much to each nutrient level will be useful when formulating foods against a nutrition target. Critical is the ability to add ingredients to the database and to be able to use a formulated food as a subsequent ingredient in another product or a consumer recipe.

Don't forget to ask those general software questions which cover more than just the cost of product (initial purchase, maintenance, updates and upgrades). What technical support is

offered: e-mail or phone? Are there training courses? Can the program link in with other computer functions in your company such as production planning? And often overlooked, don't forget to check operating system requirements (compatibility, minimum processor speed, disk space and RAM required). And last but definitely not least, look for a user friendly "intuitive" interface that you are happy to work with. It will be limiting if the program takes ages to master, and requires extensive training of new staff.

The ultimate test of course is to put the programs through their paces with an actual product when you have them for a 30 day trial period. Compare the calculated results with analytical results. Inevitably there will be variances which need to be examined. Eliminate possible reasons such as data entry errors, wrong information from suppliers and/or seasonal variations in raw material and analytical errors. Then you will be able to make an informed decision.

Coming Up: In-depth review of Genesis R&D and Foodworks.

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Original article published in the "Food Technnology in New Zealand" magazine, March 2001, Volume 36 (3): 7. Copyright ©Anny Dentener 2001.