

# Healthy skepticism



Retailers might want to try walking the aisles in their shoppers' shoes, according to this industry gadfly.

By Jenny McTaggart

**A**ward-winning nutritionist and New York University professor Marion Nestle has long been a champion of food industry reform, challenging the perceptions and strategies of retailers and manufacturers alike in presentations and in several books, including the provocative *Food Politics*.

In her latest book, *What to Eat: An Aisle-by-Aisle Guide to Savvy Food Choices and Good Eating*, Nestle speaks directly to the growing number of Americans who are concerned about their own health, and the planet's. Through a department-by-department tour of a typical supermarket, she tackles consumers' questions on topics such as how to read nutrition labels, whether farm-raised or wild-caught fish is best, and whether sweet cereals can be healthy.

Nestle's answers are likely to provoke some defensive posturing among many in the industry. Still, her comments shed light on important consumer issues that supermarkets ought to be prepared to address. Here Nestle shares with PROGRESSIVE GROCER some of what she's gleaned from her research, including tips that mainstream supermarkets should be aware of when it comes to their shoppers' health-and-wellness concerns.

**PG: Why did you decide to write this book?**

**Marion Nestle:** Friends and colleagues told me that *Food Politics* didn't tell them what to eat. They said they found supermarkets paralyzing: so many choices, so much confusing informa-

tion, and so many temptations. I didn't have a good feel for why food choices feel so confusing for so many people, but I thought I ought to. So I started going to supermarkets, section by section, and doing first-hand investigation. This turned out to be really interesting, and a lot of fun.

**PG: Why do so many shoppers find it challenging to make decisions in the supermarket?**

**Nestle:** The issues in food choice are overwhelming: how foods taste, whether they're good for you, how the ways they're produced affect the environment, and a host of social questions ranging from how animals are raised to labor practices and protection of wildlife. The issues are complicated and the choices can be really difficult, especially because marketers want people to believe that the foods they produce are especially good for you and the environment. Some are, and some aren't. But you need to know a lot to figure it all out.

**PG: As you delved deeper into research for the book, what surprised you most about the way supermarkets do business?**

**Nestle:** I was surprised by how much business aspects trump health considerations. Supermarkets are in the business of selling as much food as possible, and every aspect of every store is set up to encourage customers to buy as much as possible of the products that will bring in the most revenue.

**PG: In your opinion, are supermarkets in touch with their customers?**

**Nestle:** Some are very much in

touch, some less so. Whole Foods knows its customer segment extremely well. People who live in towns lucky enough to have a Wegmans consider it a community resource. Others are still focused on selling highly profitable junk food, and are ignoring health, environmental, and social issues that matter a great deal to an increasing number of people.

**PG: What should supermarkets know about their customers?**

**Nestle:** They need to know what kind of world people want to live in—at a very deep level. Food is much more than fuel; it reflects a range of social issues that people really care about.

**PG: What can retailers do to make the shopping experience easier?**

**Nestle:** How about placing healthier foods in positions of prime real estate—at the ends of aisles, 60 inches up from the floor, and at the cash registers? How about teaching customers to cook or use healthier foods in tasty ways? How about doing some real education about food and health? When I speak to supermarket executives, all I hear is excuses: "We're just offering choices, and it's up to the consumer to exercise personal responsibility." OK, but how about making it easier for consumers to make better choices?

**PG: In the past year or so, a number of supermarkets have been taking steps to become health educators. One example is hiring certified dietitians to advise customers and publish articles about healthy lifestyles. Some stores are reformulating**

**their self-manufactured products to make them healthier. A few retailers are using shelf labels to make it easier for shoppers to find organics and other healthy foods. Are these the kinds of steps you were envisioning?**

**Nestle:** Definitely. Right now the default is to position junk food where it gets the most exposure and eye contact. I'd like to see some experimenting with ways to position healthier foods as impulse buys.

**PG: What's your vision of how health-and-wellness concerns will impact supermarkets and the food industry in general in the coming decade?**

**Nestle:** Investment research companies have issued warning after warning that food businesses have to change their ways or get left behind. This means making it easier for customers to make healthful choices. It also means paying close attention to what gets marketed to impressionable young children and how it gets marketed.

Mind you, I have lots of sympathy for conventional supermarkets caught between the Whole Foods approach and Wal-Mart. But many consumers care deeply about humane, eco-friendly agricultural practices; about fair trade and wildlife protection; and, of course, about nutrition and health. This is a big order, and poses enormous challenges. That's where leadership comes in.

*Marion Nestle's latest book, What to Eat: An Aisle-by-Aisle Guide to Savvy Food Choices and Good Eating, was released last month by North Point Press. For more information: [www.whattoeatbook.com](http://www.whattoeatbook.com).*