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Sweetener to the Stars: Celebrity Tie-ins Boost Stevia Sales

Unapproved Herbal Sugar Substitute Cranks Up Heavy PR Campaign

By [Stephanie Thompson](#)

Published: August 14, 2006

NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- Arianna Huffington uses it. Entertainment mogul Suzanne de Passe asks for it. And Hachette Filipacchi Media President-CEO Jack Kliger prefers it.



Although unapproved for use as a sweetener by the FDA, the herbal product stevia is enjoying increased sales as a result of a public relations campaign hyping its use by the rich and famous. | ALSO: Comment on this article in the 'Your Opinion' box below.

famous.

Until recently, all-natural, no-calorie stevia -- banned for use as a sweetener since 1995 -- was known only to the most die-hard of health fanatics shopping in natural-foods stores. But over the last year, leading stevia marketer Wisdom Natural Brands has used celebrity seeding and public-relations efforts to make its brand, SweetLeaf Stevia Plus, the most talked-about nonsweetener sweetener. Sales of its plant-derived product -- though still small -- are up

Celebrities

Peruse the power tables at New York media hotspot Michael's and you'll find it nestled among the pink, blue and brown packets of sugar substitutes: stevia. The sweet herb, although still not approved by the FDA as a sugar substitute, is becoming the "dietary supplement" of choice stirred into the beverages of the rich and

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nearly 40% in the past year.

Sweetleaf Stevia

Michael's General Manager Steve Millington has himself used stevia in smoothies and tea for almost two decades. But it was only after a request a few months back by the de Passe Entertainment CEO that he started carrying SweetLeaf Stevia, which he said "fits right in with our more forward, healthful ideals." Mr. Millington noted, however, that while he has "turned a few people on to it," he doesn't get pushy.

The pushiness has come largely from SweetLeaf Stevia's Los Angeles-based PR firm, Light Years Ahead, which launched a campaign to educate media editors about the benefits of stevia -- and particularly the SweetLeaf Stevia brand -- as a no-calorie, no-carb natural alternative to sugar. In addition to coverage in magazines, including *Real Simple*, *Men's Health*, *GQ* and *Shape* (all edited by the very media elite that patronize Michael's), the firm has also seeded the packets in celebrity haunts, starting in L.A. with Earth Cafe and Fred Segal. It's now moving to "better restaurants" in New York and San Francisco.

Used as the main sugar substitute in Coca-Cola and other products in Japan (where aspartame is banned), stevia was banned in the mid '90s from being imported as a food ingredient. The FDA allows it only as a dietary supplement, citing research that shows potential cancer risk.

Can't be patented

Sonia Catlvedt, a spokeswoman for natural-foods data firm Spins, said that "there is no incentive for one company to invest in all the research necessary to get FDA approval because [stevia] is an herb and can't be patented."

And that may be hampering its growth. Spins research for the 52 weeks ended June 17 shows the supplement's sales in food, drug and mass merchandisers as well as in natural supermarkets coming in at only \$18 million, up 38%.

Compare that to the \$180 million in sales for Splenda, which commands 60% of the \$300 million-plus low-calorie sweetener category.

Gaining distribution in mainstream grocery stores has been tough given the lack of FDA approval for the product as a sweetener, which makes retailers afraid (though not barred) from shelving the product in the sweetener section, said Michele Bene, marketing manager of Wisdom.

Whole Foods

Despite distribution in 95% of natural-foods stores and commanding a roughly 70% share there, Wisdom's growth has been stymied by the fact that "80% of people looking for stevia in stores cannot find it," she said. Natural-foods chain Whole Foods does a brisk business in stevia -- carrying packets, droppers and spoonable vials of the herb from brands including SweetLeaf, New Natural, Now, Planetary and its own 360 private label -- but it carries it in its Whole Body section along with supplements.

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Ms. Bene acknowledged with a sigh that "someone will have to take the hit eventually" and put up the millions of dollars to embark on the five-year process to gain FDA approval for stevia -- and "everybody expects it to be us since we're the leader."

Though Wisdom is exploring the idea, its enthusiasm is dampened by the slew of competitors that would most assuredly ride its coattails -- all the way to the bank, if not the white tablecloths of Michael's.

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