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Number crunch gets easier for food shoppers

By Edward D. Murphy

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Hannaford Bros.' nutritional rating system carries a lot of weight with shoppers.

The grocery chain says its "guiding stars" program, which assigns nutritional ratings to food products, is influencing purchases.

The rating system offers from zero to three stars for food items. Three stars - think apples and oranges - means the food provides a nutritional wallop. No stars - chocolate-covered park rinds - well, not too much.

Hannaford said customer surveys revealed people want a peek inside the nutritional value of food but don't want to spend a couple of minutes comparing nutritional statements on boxes of cereal

"There's too much information out there and from time to time, it's confusing," said Caren Epstein, Hannaford's spokeswoman. Customers want "a quick and easy way to locate the most nutritious products in the store."

The company devised a formula with pluses *for* minerals, fiber, vitamins and all the other stuff that's good *for* you and minuses for items such as saturated fat, cholesterol, added sugar and those things you tell your kids are bad for them until you sound like your parents.

Epstein said the company spent about two years working on research, development and testing the formula, which relies on the nutritional values that are listed on food products. The "guiding stars" ratings are listed on the store shelves alongside a product's price.

Vendors *were* called in June and told that the ratings would be out soon. Hannaford reassured them the ratings were simply a consumer service, not an attempt to influence a particular product's sales. "The people who sell cookies knew that they had sugar and fat in many of their products. The same thing with salty snacks," she said. "We're still going to sell those items and people are still going to buy them. (The rating) just represents the best nutritional values in each category."

It's having an impact on the weekly shopping trip, Epstein said.

Hannaford compared purchases with the same period from a year ago and "we're seeing that consumers are buying more star items as a percentage of their total basket" since the nutritional ratings started popping up on the shelves.

Epstein is quick to note that the ratings don't represent a diet and aren't intended to shame people into buying only star-worthy foods. But, she noted, the fact that shopping habits have changed indicate that consumers do care about what's in their food.

"Consumers are talking with their wallets," she said.