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Veganism in the UK has grown enormously in recent years. The number of people sticking to a plant-based diet is reported by [The Vegan Society](#) to have quadrupled between 2014 and 2019 to now total over 600,000 individuals. And just five years ago the Veganuary campaign had fewer than 13,000 sign-ups, whereas now it has over [400,000](#).

All the research into veganism indicates that the numbers of people switching is growing year on year, before you even factor in all the vegetarians and flexitarians also making use of innovative vegan products, suggesting this is a longer-term movement rather than just another passing consumer fad.

So, the rise and rise of veganism clearly presents UK food manufacturers with some real opportunities. But, while the industry must gear up to meet new demand, it must also overcome significant and unprecedented obstacles in ensuring the highest possible standards are upheld.

Part of the increased adoption of veganism has undoubtedly been driven by environmental, health and ethical factors. Naturally, people want to do what they perceive to be the right thing for themselves and for the planet.

Moreover, the ingenuity of scientists in creating scores of incredible new products - everything from meat-free burgers, soya and almond milks and baby foods to yogurts, spreads, pet food and vitamins - that appeal to consumers enamored by the texture of meat has opened the door to a new world for millions worldwide.

But this is not simply a matter for food scientists. We need to meet the growing needs of vegans not only on the supermarket shelves but also in restaurants where demand will need to increasingly cater for their lifestyle choices. So, the know-how we've built over several projects dictates that we will need to go back to the very fundamentals of the production process and plant design and draw on the experience of those already immersed in vegan food production.

If the industry is to capitalize on the growing plant-based opportunities in the market, it must overcome concerns about the validity of vegan claims on food labeling. For example, there have been many media reports about products making such claims having been

contaminated by ingredients sourced from animals.

In fact, such is the uncertainty in this area, it is currently possible for a UK product, certified by the Vegan Society, also to bear a 'may contain' statement about milk and eggs - the kind of contradiction that turns off consumers conditioned to believe, rightly in the case of food allergen advice, that packaging claims are categoric.

Should further incidents come to light, the manufacturers or brands in question risk both eroding public confidence in vegan products and the claims they make, along with the potential for significant damage to their reputations.

In the absence of a defined legal framework around vegan claims, therefore, the onus is very much on them to go that extra mile in ensuring they can protect their integrity and ensure consumers buy precisely what they think they are.

We know from experience in supporting meat substitute and plant-based food manufacturers that there really are no corners to be cut, if they are to guarantee their customers that their products can be trusted.

The Vegan Society, for example, validates by product rather than facility and they set the bar understandably high for producers seeking their approval. So manufacturers need to prepare at the earliest stages of process design and partner with experts familiar with the society's precise requirements.

And, with Google searches on the topic only throwing up instances of Californian scientists successfully manipulating a protein in an experimental kitchen, there is scant information out there for someone looking to set up a vegan-only line or facility.

Our experience at [adi Projects](#) tells us there are several factors they have to consider. Not only should manufacturers conduct supplier approval processes but they will have to work closely with their partners to ensure on an ongoing basis that there is no risk of cross-contamination. This is, after all, a fast-moving sector and a supplier who previously did no such thing can suddenly start dealing with animal-based ingredients.

On a similar note, many manufacturers producing vegan, vegetarian and meat-based products on the same production lines can learn from the concept of 'allergen build' to schedule their production runs in that order - no animal-derived ingredients (vegan), before products containing eggs or milk (vegetarian), before products with meat - to avoid cross-contamination.

In other set-ups, the production of those types of foods should be segregated into separate, dedicated lines. While that sounds ideal, it does require that controls are not only put in place to ensure one line isn't contaminated by airborne materials, such as powders, from another but the efficacy of the measure can be properly validated.

There are also myriad issues to be overcome in terms of cleaning controls, employee training and analytical testing regimes looking for the presence of animal DNA in samples, so the industry certainly has its work cut out in the years ahead.

But, while it cannot always be about ripping it up and starting again, it is also true to say that vegan-only facilities will necessarily be part of the solution for manufacturers looking to mitigate as many of the risks associated with vegan food production as possible.

With 52% of all new meat-free products launched in the UK in 2017 bearing a vegan claim according to [Mintel](#) and with veganism's march showing no signs of slowing down, manufacturers would be well served in the long-term by building facilities dedicated to the needs of vegan food production.

And that takes us back to production process and plant design. Getting in the right experts to look at things differently from the outset to ensure that such dedicated facilities are purpose-built for a specific type of food production that remains in its infancy. Ensuring processes not only accommodate new categories of ingredients but do so safely and in transparent ways meet emerging regulatory requirements and breed public confidence.

With the right project partner onboard from even the pre-feasibility stages and right through to handover and ongoing maintenance, manufacturers can make this bold step, with certainty about their costs, program and risks.

The food scientists have done wonders in recent years creating new ingredients and new possibilities. But, if consumer demand is to be met, essentially, a gauntlet has been thrown down to manufacturers.

Meeting that challenge will leave them safe in the knowledge that they are gearing themselves up effectively and before the competition to grasp one of UK food production's biggest new opportunities in decades. And the time to do it is now.