

Shopping for Nutrition Software

When you went to school, they taught you how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide using pencil and paper. Most literate people know this process well, but few use it to reconcile their checkbooks. This is because a calculator can do this job faster and more accurately. The same holds true for the variety of services that nutrition professionals provide to their clients today. Using paper and pencil to do something that software can do much better than you can is a waste of your time. Whether you work for one boss or whether you work for many bosses (also called “clients”), you can improve your productivity by leveraging the capabilities offered by today’s nutrition and fitness software programs. If you’re not using nutrition software – or if you’re using underpowered or obsolete software - you’re not fully utilizing your education, experience, or time.

Investment precedes dividends. Low-end nutrition software products are simply not designed to handle the special needs of nutrition professionals. Professional software has to track many clients and support report customization, a large nutrient database, and the ability to save reports in a wide variety of formats. The bitterness of inadequate or missing capabilities will far outlast the sweetness of low price. But keep your eye open for discounts... discounts are available to students, educators, and registered users of competing products. And if a lump sum payment is too hard on you, some software makers will split your payment into two or three monthly installments for you *if you ask*. But before you lay down your money, do your homework - if you let price be your only consideration or you do sloppy or incomplete research, you may discover that sometimes, investment precedes losses.

Get more capability that you think you need. Let's face it - you can't be too rich, too thin, or have too much nutrient analysis software capability. You can't know all the capabilities you'll need before you begin working with actual clients. Don't put yourself into the position of having to apologize for your software's inadequacies. Your clients won't see your software's inadequacies - they will only see *your* inadequacies. Look for capabilities you may not have considered... you'll never know when one of those features will win you a new client or make an old one happy.

Web Research, ADA Listserves. The Web is probably the best starting point for researching nutrition software. Visit the links provided in the sidebar to this article. If you’re an ADA member, you may be entitled to join an American Dietetic Association Dietetics-L listserv or one of the American Dietetic Associations Dietetic Practice Groups (DPG) listserves. This will allow you to enter into online discussions (via email) with your peers to discuss software programs, specific features, and just about anything else you’d like to talk about with other RD’s – RD’s with direct, hands-on experience with the products you are considering. For more information about the American Dietetic Association and its practice groups, visit www.eatright.org

Evaluate objectively. Filter the fluff and see if there's anything of substance left. Make a list of “must have” features and make sure the product you end up choosing supports them. A product may be beautiful, clean, elegant, and priceless... it might even be the “Paragon of Perfection,” but it may still lack features that you absolutely need. Get the facts. Compare products side-by-side and feature-by-feature. Buy informed.

Contact the software maker. Email them a question or two. Find out if they answer their email promptly and answer questions clearly and concisely. Call their sales number and express your interest in learning more about their nutrition software. Use this initial contact to get a feel for what it will be like to work with this company after the sale. If they have a sales pitch to deliver, hear them out. Give them the opportunity to convince you that their software is the best choice for your needs. Listen for compelling reasons to select their software based on the merits of their software and support. Then narrow the discussion to the topics in which you have special interest – your “must have” features.

Request an evaluation copy. Most nutrition software companies will provide you with an evaluation copy of their software. If you don’t see a download page for a demo version on their web site, email them and request one. Some evaluations are basically programmed presentations that walk you through the software – an idealized mini-tour. Others are fully functional for some time period. Working with evaluation copies gives you the opportunity to play with the user interface, get a feel for the software’s power and flexibility, and compare it - head-to-head - to competing products. An evaluation copy can also provide fodder for follow-up questions before you buy.

Free Product Support? Annual fees? Discount for upgrades? Does the company provide a toll-free number for you to call if you have questions about their software? Are you allowed to use this toll-free number forever? Or do you start paying for the calls 45 days after you purchase the software? In my opinion, if you have to pay for the phone call, it isn’t free. Some nutrition software companies send you an invoice every year (typically \$200 or more) for continued product updates and support. Some companies don’t charge for product support after a certain time period. Instead, they offer toll-free tech support for as long as you use the product, provide free updates for the version you purchased, and offer discounted upgrade pricing for major new releases. This way of doing business gives *you* the choice of whether you want to upgrade or not... and it also provides an incentive for the software developer to offer major new releases that are worthy of the upgrade fee.

Read the EULA. Most software makers don’t like to show you their EULA until *after* you’ve already paid for their software. Since the EULA governs your rights in using the software, you really ought to read it *before* you purchase. This document will tell you if you have to purchase separate copies for your work PC, home PC, and your laptop. It will tell you if several people can use the software if you install it on a single PC. These and other interesting usage provisions are spelled out in the EULA. This document will also give you a good indication of this company’s attitude toward you, their customer. While many EULA’s are reasonable, there are some that most people would consider downright draconian. Some companies post their EULA on their web sites and others don’t. Be smart. Know what you’re agreeing to *before* you agree to it.

Update History. Check the software maker’s web site for their listing of all updates they’ve released for their software in, say, the past five years. If a software maker has made progress, believe me, they’ll be proud of it and they’ll want you to know about it. Their update history will itemize all the new features, nutrient database updates, and bug fixes. Look for is a record of continuous improvement. If you can’t locate this information on the software maker’s web site, contact them and ask them to provide you a copy of their update history. If they can’t - or won’t – it could be because they’ve made little or no progress in the past few years... such a list would

make this all too obvious. When software companies withhold information, ask yourself why? Then ask them why?

Basic Functions of Nutrition and Fitness Software

Nutrition professionals perform some tasks so often that virtually all nutrition software packages can perform them. These tasks include recipe analysis, food intake analysis, exercise tracking, client information tracking, and of course, report generation. These basic functions form the core of what most RD's need to get done. What sets them apart are the features that go above and beyond the basics.

Food Intakes

A multi-day food intake (also called a "food recall" or "food record") makes it easier for you to make useful dietary recommendations to your clients. If you find that your client is taking in 57% of her daily calories from fat and that she loves to eat cheeseburgers, French fries, doughnuts, and milkshakes every day, your recommendations will follow easily and logically from your intake analysis. The key factors to look for when performing food recalls are versatility and flexibility... some nutrition software packages let you record food intakes by using your software, by using software that your clients can install on their own PC's, or by using software you install to your client's PDA.

Client-Side Intake Recorders. One type of intake recorder deserves your special attention because it can vastly improve your productivity. It's called a "client intake recorder" or "client intake module" and not all nutrition software packages support it. It's a software program you give to your clients so they can record their own food intakes. You provide software to your clients so that they can install it on their own PC, then record everything they eat over any time period. With a click of a button, they can email you their results. You import the data into your nutrition software to produce an in-depth analysis report, complete with your recommendations. Look for software that allow you to create (i.e., "burn") reusable CD's, allows unlimited usage, is royalty free, and permits your clients to download it from your web site if you wish.

PDA-Based Intake Recorders. Some nutrition software will allow your clients with PDA's (Personal Digital Assistants) to record their food intakes on their own handheld computer (PDA). You can transfer a database of foods to their PDA. They take their handheld computer with them and record everything they eat for any number of days. On their next visit, they set their PDA into your cradle and transfer their data into your PC's nutrition software package. As far as you're concerned, the data will look as if you had entered it yourself, except for one very nice thing – you didn't have to enter it yourself!

Recipe Analysis

Most nutrition software will let you create and analyze recipes. Look for software that will allow you to create a recipe and adjust the serving size by the number of servings or by weight. A "scaling" feature will let you automatically recalculate the ingredient amounts to feed more or fewer people. Once again, what differentiates today's nutrition software offerings lie in the features that expand on these basic functions.

Publish a cookbook. Features that let you reuse work you've already done make you more productive. The ability to define a custom layout for your recipe and save it as a formatted word processor page is great for creating cookbooks (or booklets of pertinent recipes for your clients).

To do this, you need software that supports “recipe templates.” You define the recipe layout and have the software convert all selected recipes into the desired format for your new publication. You select which nutrients and other variables to include, where they appear on the page, etc. If you’re going to invest the time to develop a lot of great recipes, you might as well compile them into a new cookbook each year – especially if it requires only a few additional minutes of your time.

Publish a Recipe-A-Day Web Page. Another useful feature is the ability to save your recipes in a customized web page format. This lets you format your recipes for use on any web site in existence. By setting up a “web page template,” you can save any or all selected recipes into that web page format. This allows you to support one or many “Recipe-A-Day” web sites by just selecting the appropriate template and saving any or all of your recipes. This feature makes it look like you gave up many evenings to produce these pages, but with the right software package, your actual time can be just a few seconds.

Nutrition Facts Labels. Not all nutrition software will generate Nutrition Facts Labels for you. Some packages provide this ability at no additional charge while others sell you an additional component that adds the ability to create labels. Look for packages that offer a variety of formats, let you resize your labels to anything you need, offer to automatically insert your ingredient list sorted from high-to-low based on gram weight, and let you save your labels in a variety of formats. The vector-based WMF (Windows MetaFile) Format is good for publication quality work because it is “resolution-independent” – you can blow it up to any size you wish with no loss of image quality. A good range of file output formats is vital if you wish to support word processor documents, web pages, and publication quality food labels.

Client Information and Contact Tracking

Although most professional nutrition software place no limits on the number of clients you can track, they vary considerably when it comes to managing your client data. The best products allow you to track personal information, measurement data, body chemistry, and diabetic information as well as “log-on” information like name, age, gender, weight, etc. They let you organize your clients into groups so you can group them by affiliation, special needs, or any other criteria you want to use. Look for the ability to track your client’s contact information in an integrated database that you can export into a format suitable for use with your email program for mass mailings (like a monthly newsletter).

Fitness Manager

Most nutrition regimens today include a strong emphasis on exercise. Look for software that calculates calorie expenditures *based on your client’s body weight*. It’s hard to believe, but some high-end software programs, but some well-known nutrition software programs still calculate the same calorie expenditure for 30 minutes of aerobics for an 82 lb. girl or a 250 lb. man! Look for exercise managers that allow you to enter data from an indirect calorimeter, modify the formulas used to calculate metabolism (and their associated activity multipliers), and override calculated values (useful for implementing doctor orders), and support for Target Heart Rate Training.

Calorie Expenditures Report. This is one fitness report that deserves special mention. A Calorie Expenditures Report places your client’s name and current body weight at the top of the report, then lists dozens of activities and the calories that *this client* would burn in performing any of these activities for 30 minutes. If you give a client the goal of burning 250 calories a day,

this report lets her choose the activities she wants to do to reach this goal (oh yes, and that other goal of losing a half pound every seven days). This approach gives your clients a variety of activity choices and it saves you the time required to create a detailed exercise prescription. As you might expect, this type of report is popular with health clubs.

Client Reports

The main thing you give to your client - besides your advice - will be your reports. Because your reports are often the last thing your clients see before you hand them their bill, it's an excellent idea to make sure your reports are commensurate with your fee. This is not the place to cut corners. Provide your clients with colorful reports on good paper – let them know that you always treat your clients to “first-class.” Make sure your reports are easy-to-understand, useful, professional and polished in appearance, and comprehensive. If you make your reports outstanding, you will look outstanding.

Flexible Formatted Reports. Most software products offer you “fixed format” reports in which the software maker pre-selects all your options for you. Fixed format reports only have one look because all your options have been selected for you. A better choice is a package that supports “flexible format” reports. Flexible format reports allow *you* to select the nutrients analyzed, insert your company logo or your photograph, and let's you decide whether you want to include pie charts, Nutrition Facts Labels, client information, borders, drop shadows, dividers, colors, shading, page numbers, images, and/or a wide variety of other options. Choose a package that lets you save your reports in PDF, word processor, or web page formats. Look for the ability to export your reports into a format suitable for use in spreadsheets, databases, or statistical analysis software.

Integrated Backup and Restore

Most users will tell you that they could be more productive if they were able to load their nutrition software onto more than one machine. Look for nutrition software that lets you click a button to create a full backup of your work. A nice touch to integrated backup is the ability to have your software email your backup to anyone you wish – including yourself. You should also be able to backup your data to removable media (like a flash drive).

The Bottom Line

You live and work in a competitive environment. Clients have many choices for their health, fitness, and nutrition advice. To stand out, you must be able to provide excellent reports, in-depth analyses, and easy-to-understand advice. You need to do this accurately, quickly, and at a price that's a bargain for your client. The right nutrition software can help you achieve these goals. So set aside some time and get informed. Sit down in front of your computer, fire up your browser, and visit the web sites listed in this article's sidebar. Educate yourself. As you learn about features you find useful, add them to your list of “must have” features. Email questions to the companies who market software products that sound promising. Follow up with phone calls. Listen to the product specialist. Get the answers you need. Take notes. Discuss your options with your associates. Consider posting questions or asking for opinions on the ADA listserves. Then narrow your choices down to the single best product for *your* particular needs. If you've exercised due diligence, you won't waste time wondering if you made the right decision.

-- Ed Prestwood, President, CyberSoft, Inc.