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How Food Labels Should Convey Messages

Most people would agree that the hype about nutritional values is bordering on the hysterical. Really obese people know perfectly well without needing to rely on red and green lights, that if they continue to eat large quantities of chocolate bars and crisps it will do them no good.

But having said this, consumers are entitled to be interested and informed about food values.

As both a marketer and a consumer I believe that the current food labelling methods are baffling and often illogical for the following reasons:

1. There is no uniform labelling method in terms of content and presentation. This makes it very difficult for consumers to compare nutritional information across a range of products- particularly as some labels do not contain a single word of English and not all foods display nutritional information;
2. The nutritional information that is presented is not always easy to interpret; and
3. The health claims on products are often meaningless and therefore misleading to consumers. This erodes consumer trust in the labelling information provided.

Let's take a look at each of these points in more detail:

First, in the UK there is not a set format for presenting nutritional information. In other words, nutritional information labels look different from one product to another, are positioned on different parts of the packet and do not carry information about the same things.

This means that it is very difficult for a consumer to compare the health benefits of different products easily because no two labels are the same. This can often lead to confusion and frustration when making product choices.

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Moreover, since food products are not required by law to display nutritional information the lives of consumers who want to follow a healthy diet are made very difficult.

In the United States a considerable amount of research and public consultation was undertaken to find out exactly what information consumers wanted to see on labels.

The results showed that above all else they wanted consistency of layout to help them compare products easily and understand the nutritional value that they offered.

The FDA used this research to develop clear and easy to understand labels which have been very popular amongst US consumers and which have to be displayed on most types of food and beverages.

Amongst other benefits the new labels offer:

- Easy-to-read formats that allow consumers to more quickly find the information they need;
- Information on the amount per serving of saturated fat, cholesterol, dietary fibre, salt, and other nutrients of major health concern; and
- Uniform definitions for terms that describe a food's nutritional content--such as 'light', 'low-fat' and 'high-fibre' – to ensure that such terms mean the same thing for any product on which they appear.

Standardised serving sizes that make nutritional comparisons of similar products easier. I see no reason why such a logical and straightforward approach to food labelling should not also be adopted in the UK.

Secondly, according to recent studies, many people have a hard time understanding food labels. This is often because food labelling does not make sense and can require relatively complicated mental arithmetic.

For instance, it is not uncommon for nutritional information to be provided which is based on a 100 gram portion of a product despite the fact that the product in question actually weighs less or more than this.

This can be pretty confusing for consumers and I for one have spent a great deal of time in supermarket aisles scrunching up my face trying to work out how much fibre or vitamins I'm actually getting from such products.

We should be aiming to make it as easy as possible for consumers to understand the nutritional value of different foods rather than setting them complicated maths tests every time they go shopping!



Thirdly the so-called health claims on food products are often meaningless and therefore misleading.

Cereal bars, for example, are described by manufacturers as healthy and wholesome, but in fact many are no healthier than a bar of chocolate! Whilst many so-called 'clinically proven' claims such as heart health are grossly exaggerated.

This means that the descriptive labels on foods cannot be relied on to help people make choices about what they are eating.

Paradoxically it is not only consumers who are suffering but many manufacturers and retailers are being bludgeoned into adopting voluntary codes that do not help them to sell their products any more than they help consumers to make informed decisions.

There are clearly a number of problems with the current food labelling methods, but what's the answer?

I believe it lies in adopting a consistent approach to labelling techniques (similar to the one used in the US) and making it a legal requirement for all food products to carry nutritional information displayed in a uniform, logical and easy to understand way. Only then will consumers be able to understand the nutritional value of the food that they buy and be able to make an informed choice about the products that they purchase.