

The Risky Business of Risk-Reduction Health Claims

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☀️ **Definition**

The USA is the only country with a legislated definition of a health claim. Abbreviated as a "risk-reduction" declaration, these statements make reference to dietary requirements, a food or food ingredient and the ability of the combination to reduce the risk of chronic disease affliction.

☀️ **Myths and Mores**

Many stakeholders believe risk-reduction health claims hold the promise to increased sales and profits. Evidence suggests this confidence is misplaced since risk-reduction claims are antithetical to the self-empowerment that motivates consumers in the wellness sector.

☀️ **Healthy but not hearty**

Well-designed consumer behaviour and attitude studies in many industrialized countries (USA, CDA, AU) indicate that consumers do not regard risk-reduction claims as uplifting, health-promoting advice. They shun them as negative and foreboding. A Canadian study evaluated alternative phrases such as "heart healthy" only to have some participants also dismiss these as cutesy clichés.

☀️ **Significant Findings are Qualified**

Risk-reduction health claims are substantiated by "significant scientific agreement" among designated experts. Yet the findings of the experts are qualified with the word "may" as in "may reduce the risk of heart disease". In no other discipline are significant results minimized to nebulous probability.

☀️ **The Corollary is Equally True**

Insertion of one word - not - as in "may not reduce the risk of..." is also correct, yet the statement defies the scientific support.

☀️ **Push and Shove**

Health claims are a push strategy, in the USA originating from the government; in other countries, desired by food manufacturers. Push strategies are more costly and less efficient than consumer-generated pull strategies. Many consumers are demanding mandatory nutrition information and disclosure of genetically-modified ingredients, yet few, if any, are requesting health claims on food labels. They appear to be on the back burner (if on the stove top at all) for consumers.

☀️ **Their Pull they Hath No More**

The best-documented increase in sales attributed to health-giving properties discovered in a food was the oat bran cholesterol-reducing craze of the late 1980's. Consumer demand peaked while the trade supplied a plethora of oat-bran laden foods, even oat bran ice cream. Many factors led to the demise of oat bran: preliminary, invalid clinical trials in need of improvement ; healthcare professionals lack of endorsement; a media skilled at "science by headlines"; in the end, weary, confused and skeptical consumers.

☀️ **The Many Faces of Science**

The science of human behaviour, especially buyer behaviour, is as essential to consumer acceptance of health claims as are food and nutritional sciences. Staying close to consumers and making health and nutrition a corporate priority, are recommended starting points. **FF**

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