

By Carol T. Culhane, P.H.Ec., MBA

Multi-tasking

Package labels behave like silent salespeople. A bright, crisp and attractive appearance is critical to being recognized on the shelf and ultimately chosen. Consumers appreciate well-designed and functional packaging as well. Package labels also inform. Some declarations such as net weight, common name and ingredient statement have been mandatory for over 25 years in most industrialized nations. Voluntary declarations such as nutrition claims and health claims, also subject to regulation, straddle the cusp of advertising and information, as manufacturers educate consumers while differentiating their product from that of the competition.

Trusted use generates demand

Today both consumers and government agencies are requesting more information on a food label. (A colleague wittily referred to this growing phenomenon as food labels becoming “the talk show of the food industry”!) Consumers want to know more about what they are eating. Health authorities hope to improve dietary patterns through mandatory declarations of certain nutrients. Many industry stakeholders balk at these demands and some lobby against the trend. However, a compliment is being made, and, missed – consumers have learned to use food labels and grown to trust in their accuracy.

A peek at some global initiatives:

In the EU and the UK, new QUID labelling has been introduced. QUID, an acronym for “quantitative ingredient declaration” requires manufacturers to indicate the percentage of the main ingredient used in a food, such as how much meat in a sausage or apple in an apple pie.

GM food labelling

GM food labelling is mandatory in Australia, Japan, the EU and UK. Australia and Japan have implemented a mandatory regime to support consumer education efforts; it is not for health or safety reasons. In January 2001, the USA’s FDA announced guidelines for voluntary labelling of GM food.

From top-down to bottom-up

In 1993, the FDA mandated Nutrition Facts on processed food to support consumer nutrition education. Soon afterwards, consumers in neighbouring Canada mounted a strong campaign for the same type of information. In response, Health Canada initiated a multi-stakeholder consultation process, including online consumer input. Canadian citizens participated, their numerous submissions providing rich insight into consumer use and expectations of nutrition labelling (see web-site below). Health Canada announced late in year 2000 that nutrition labelling would become mandatory over the next few years.

Cultural preferences

Food labels reflect sharp cross-cultural contrasts. In Australia, Japan, the EU and UK, GM labels are mandatory yet nutrition labelling is not. The opposite is true of the USA, and soon, Canada. **FF**

Some web-sites

www.maff.gov.uk (UK) www.cfsan.fda.gov (USA)
<http://www.anzfa.gov.au> (AUNZ)
<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca> (CDA)

© 2001 International Food Focus Ltd., 211 Carlton Street,
East Office, Toronto, ON M5A 2K9
T: 416-924-3266 F: 416-924-2726
E: intlfocus@sympatico.ca
Food Fax is archived @ our web-site www.foodfocus.on.ca
