

An energy-based approach to nutrition labelling

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The nutrition label is an important vehicle through which food manufacturers can communicate essential information about the nutritional value and composition of their product. Potentially, this represents a valuable tool to help consumers make informed decisions about their diet and lifestyle. However, it appears that nutrition labels are not always effective in getting the message across.

In 2004, EUFIC conducted exploratory research into consumer expectations of nutrition labels. This research revealed that most consumers do not find nutrition labels user-friendly and, accordingly, are more inclined to ignore them. On a more positive note, however, the principles of healthy eating are generally well understood. Moreover, there is a relatively well-established notion of energy and 'calories', although few consumers really know how to apply it.

Following on from this research, EUFIC decided to investigate whether an alternative approach to communication, using energy as a focus, could be used to enhance consumer interest in nutrition labels. Would this, in turn, improve consumer motivation to learn more about nutrition and to apply the principles of nutrition measurement in their daily diet?

Label modifications tested

Consumer focus groups in four European countries (Germany, UK, France, Netherlands) were asked for their reactions to a series of modified labels on a mix of well-known brand products.

'Front of Pack' (FOP) modifications took the form of information 'flags' providing information about the energy content of the product presented in different, increasingly complex, ways.

'Back of Pack' (BOP) nutrition labels showed, in addition to the nutrition information that is normally present, a repetition of the FOP calorie flag and details of a website address that could be accessed for further nutrition information.

FOP flags

Front of pack energy information was seen by the participants as a true innovation and one that they would like to see on all packs. Consumers saw it as a way of solving the issue of time constraints when shopping, by giving a quick overview of the nutritional quality of the product. It would be most useful in assessing products with which they were unfamiliar.

Keep the message simple

The most popular FOP flags were the simple ones that conveyed the product's energy content per portion,

ideally, or per 100g. Expression of calorie content per 100g allowed for easier comparison between products, whilst calories per portion made calculation of actual intake easier, as long as the size of a 'portion' was well defined.

References to daily energy needs were also well received, but complicated graphs and percentages were generally disliked. Although some respondents liked FOP flags that gave exercise equivalents of a single portion, most hated them as they detracted from the pleasure of eating. This type of information was thought to be more acceptable on BOP labels.

Is energy the right focus?

The vast majority of respondents agreed that energy information was the right focus, and was understood by most people to be linked to weight control. However, some consumers, particularly those in the older age groups, felt that information about salt and fat content was also important.

Motivation to learn and change dietary habits

Participants in the focus groups were already very aware of the concept of 'healthy eating' and lifestyle issues, being constantly alerted to them by the media and governments. Most people thought that FOP flags would help them to think more about their dietary habits. For individuals with Internet access, the website address was considered an interesting addition that would point the way to clear help and neutral advice about calories and other dietary factors.

Room for improvement

Although consumers found that illegibility, inconsistencies and confusing terminology on labels were still an issue, everyone agreed that the proposed initiatives were a positive step. On the whole, reactions to the initiatives were remarkably consistent between countries and audiences.