

What Food Labeling Research Can Teach Us about Consumers



By DEBRA J. RINGOLD

FOR MANY consumers food shopping now involves evaluating health claims, nutrient content claims, and the nutrition facts panel. Since the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act became law, many food manufacturers have worked hard to convey the diet and health information associated with their products. In response, many consumers have learned to work with this information, taking the time to scrutinize health claims and the like before making purchase decisions. The result is better consumer choices that are potentially more satisfying.

Food labeling research has contributed to our understanding of consumer behavior and focused attention on several important consumer characteristics. Consumers are appropriately skeptical, quite capable of making informed decisions, will make the effort involved in evaluation (when it's worth the trouble), and learn from experience. In other words, consumers are smart — they understand their preferences and are able to navigate markets to achieve their goals.

In an era of blogging, online forums, and user-created content, it is more important than ever to recognize that consumers have access to information from a variety of competing sources — you, your competitors, customers, etc. If businesses hope to engage and influence consumers, they need to make sure their messages can be substantiated, communicate well, and are relevant to their target consumers.

Lessons from food labeling research

Food-related products often include a health claim (e.g., “Good for Your Heart”) or a nutrient content claim (e.g., “No Trans Fat”) on food labels and in advertising messages.

While it is likely that such claims pique much consumer interest, most consumers do not accept them without evaluation.

In a study designed to examine this issue, colleagues at the American University in Washington, D.C. and I found that well-educated consumers can evaluate the healthfulness of products

when a health claim and the nutrition facts panel appear together. Health claims did not bias the way people interpreted the health claim. In fact, it worked the other way around. People used the nutrition facts panel to put the claim in context. In addition, consumers did not make overly broad product inferences on the basis of health claims. They recognized that a health claim does not provide all of the information necessary to make an informed choice.

A second study, carried out with the same colleagues at the American University, found that neither less well educated consumers (i.e., no high school degree) nor better educated consumers (i.e., high school degree, some college, college, graduate education) were misled by health claims. Information provided in the nutrition facts panel was interpreted correctly by both groups. Again, health claims were judged within the context of the nutrition facts panel. Bottom line? Regardless of educational attainment, consumers relied on the most diagnostic information when making judgments about the healthfulness of foods. Both less and more educated cohorts demonstrated the ability to comprehend the nutrition facts panel and put the health claim in context.

Currently, I am working with colleagues at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), U.S. Federal Trade Commission, and Villanova University to learn what consumers believe about the regulation of labels and advertising and how those beliefs affect their use of information provided on labels and in food advertising. What's clear is that many consumers rely on both.

What these findings mean for your business

These studies have important implications for both businesses and regulators. Consumers have a vested interest in food and its impact on their health, especially as they grow older. Our research demonstrates that consumers, regardless of educational attainment, are

quite capable of using health claims and the nutrition facts panel to make better food decisions.

The lessons are clear. Consumers are smart—they understand their preferences and are able to navigate markets to achieve their goals. When it's worth the trouble, consumers can work with the information necessary to better decision making and you can reduce their workload. Get to know your customer. Find out what's important to them, and give them the information necessary to evaluate your product relative to others. You'll be rewarded for helping them make decisions that are right for them and their families. ■■

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