

Nutrition Labeling: What Are You Looking For?

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Consumer interest in food package labels and nutrition information continues to rise; in 1990 the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act was published to give FDA specific authority to require nutrition labeling of most foods; and to require that all nutrient content claims and health claims be consistent with FDA requirements (truthful and not misleading). With technical amendment, the Act also covers ingredient declarations and percent juice labeling. These label elements were intended to provide consumers with information needed to make informed choices among foods available; and to plan meals and diets to meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Regulations prescribe what information must be on the label (mandatory elements), what information may be on the label (voluntary elements), and where and how that information can be put on the label. But is that information 'relevant' to consumers and does it help them make informed choices? The Nutrition Facts Panel is limited in its effectiveness to inform consumers; graphic representation of the dietary choices based on those nutrition facts is confusing. The Food Guide Pyramid was replaced by the "My Plate" format. Most of us probably recall the Basic Four or Basic Five or Basic Seven--- it's all the same message but in a different format.

And then there is the ingredient list- consumers want fewer ingredients in packaged foods, whole foods; fewer chemicals; natural and not synthetic additives- less of what they don't know. And they want to talk to each other about it- and hear what Dr. Oz and others have to say.

We continually find ourselves in a reactive mode- when they wanted claims we delivered claims (health, nutrition, function); when they were concerned about allergens, we delivered allergen labeling; now we have a proposed rule for gluten free labeling.

Labeling requirements are pulling us along- our ability to effectively market is compromised each time we react to the latest consumer concern, or the stated consumer right to know. We would all agree that consumers have a right to know what is in their foods; FDA clarifies that requirement by that which is 'material' to health and safety is what is required on the label.

Material to us as food scientists and food industry representatives may be seen through a different lens than that which is material to a consumer. Most recently, the advent of locally produced, natural sourcing, fewer ingredients and less 'production' has driven a conversation that we are not well equipped to have. We continue to tell consumers that our products are safe and nutritious—that is not what they are asking about and we do not understand their question.

How do we see the future of nutrition labeling, dietary advice, label claims and testimonials- and will consumers believe us? Nutrition labeling is relevant only when the information provided is meaningful and useful to consumers. Researchers in the EU recently reported that the influence of nutrition labels on choice at the point of sale is small; small effects of front of packaging label information were reported; and that information had no influence on motivation to purchase more healthful foods. Vending machine labeling and restaurant labeling are now under discussion- it's hard to imagine what impact those messages will have after you put in your nickel and pull the lever!