

Attitudes to Food Labelling

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After a series of pilot studies had been carried out, shoppers' attitudes to most aspects of food labelling were explored by means of a mailed questionnaire. The results of this survey are reported.

The widespread use of self-service in food shops has lessened the personal contact between housewife and shopkeeper so that the former has become more and more dependent on the food label as a source of information. This dependence becomes greater as the varieties and types of food available increase so that, in many instances, housewives have little or no past experience to draw on when selecting new food products.

Little attempt has been made to establish what information is regarded as important when buying pre-packaged food, although many opinions are offered from different directions. The following is a summary of a detailed survey carried out in 1972 in order to establish more positively what housewives want to know from labels on pre-packaged foods.

During the preceding year, a number of pilot studies had been carried out amongst groups of housewives, both directly and by means of questionnaires, in order to identify the form which the final questionnaire should take and the ground which should be covered. The final survey was organised by Marketing Advisory Services Ltd. Questionnaires were mailed to a random sample of 600 British housewives; 43.2 per cent. responded (50 per cent. is considered to be a good response from postal surveys).

Comparison of the personal details provided by the respondents with national statistics for social class, age, working status, marital status and number of children, indicated that the sample of women reflected fairly well the national pattern for these categories. Even so, a non-response of 56.8 per cent. meant that the results of the survey were likely to be prejudiced. It was not possible to follow up the survey and identify the direction of the prejudice so that the importance to be attached to the prejudice was not determined. Even so, in the absence of previous data, the survey should be seen as the first such exercise providing a reasonable indication of housewives' views serving to inject facts into a subject on which opinions abound.

Complete details of the survey together with many other aspects associated with food labelling are contained in "The Food Label" by A. Turner (M.Phil. Thesis, Nottingham University, 1972).

Questionnaire

Seventeen questions were asked, together with invitations to provide personal details and also to comment on any aspect of labelling not included in the questionnaire. Each question and the response to it is considered separately below.

RECOGNITION OF ITEMS

Respondents were faced with a list of 18 items of information, which could appear on food labels and they were asked to tick which of them appear most commonly. The items selected fell roughly into 3 groups: those recognised by most of the respondents, i.e. over 74 per cent.; those recognised by many i.e. 30-74 per cent. and those recognised by only a minority, i.e. less than 30 per cent.

Group 1: + 74 per cent. Recognition

- Manufacturer's name
- Brand name
- Product description
- Ingredients
- Directions for use

Group 2: 30-74 per cent. Recognition

- Manufacturer's address
- Illustration of contents
- "Use-by date" on perishables
- Number of helpings
- Selling price
- Guarantee
- Imported

Group 3: Less than 30 per cent. Recognition

- Recommended price
- Storage instructions
- Recipes
- Unit price
- Size of helpings
- "Use-by date" on non-perishables

The separate groups broadly reflected the extent to which items within them appear on food labels. A possible explanation as to why manufacturer's address should fall into the second group rather than the first may be because The Labelling of Food Order 1953 had not been completely revoked by the Labelling of Food Regulations 1970 at the time of the survey, so that labels carrying trade marks need not have included the manufacturers address at that time.

In the main, the pattern of recognition was similar for all categories of women, but some differences existed. Older women were more conscious of price, as were women in social grades C2, D and E, these also being more aware

of quantity. As might then be expected, recognition of items on the list was weighted towards the information with which respondents were pre-occupied when shopping. The social grading scale ranges from A, i.e. upper middle class, to E, i.e. those people at the lowest levels of subsistence.

ALLOCATION OF NEED

Using the same list of 18 items, respondents were asked to indicate how necessary they thought each item to be. Scores were allocated to the responses as follows:

Absolutely necessary	= 3
Necessary	= 2
Fairly necessary	= 1
Not needed at all	= 0

The average scores are listed in Table I. When the spread of scores for each item were compared, it was found that the higher the score, the greater the agreement amongst correspondents as to need.

TABLE I
RANKING OF IMPORTANCE OF LABEL INFORMATION

Item	Average score
Use-by date on perishables	2.9
Quantity	2.7
Ingredients	2.6
Selling price	2.6
Product description	2.6
Directions for use	2.5
Manufacturer's name	2.5
Brand name	2.4
Guarantee of satisfaction	2.3
Manufacturer's address	2.2
Storage directions	2.1
Recommended price	2.1
Unit price	1.9
Use-by date on non-perishables	1.9
Imported	1.8
Number of helpings	1.6
Illustration of contents	1.1
Size of helpings	1.1
Recipes	1.0

The majority of women clearly rated knowing the keeping life of perishable foods as extremely important. Bacon and cream were the examples quoted in the questionnaire. At the time of the survey, this subject was topical in the mass media. Even so, the attitude of respondents may well reflect the extent to which underlying family experience can no longer be relied on to arm housewives sufficiently to cope with an ever widening choice of pre-packed commodities which are completely new in concept, or which have previously been sold loose for immediate consumption.

Much less importance was attached to knowing the shelf-life of non-perishables. The examples quoted were jam and canned beans, both products which become perishable when the hermetically sealed containers are opened. This aspect was recognised since some respondents separately commented on the need to know how long canned goods would keep once opened.

Ingredients were given a much higher ranking than might have been expected, so providing evidence of the importance which housewives attach to knowing about products. It may also reflect concern about product composition, the extent to which the ingredients list fulfils an educational role and its function as a means of making food manufacturers accountable.

The importance attached to the Guarantee of Satisfaction is surprising in view of some of the other items ranked below it. It could be that such a guarantee provides reassurance in a shopping situation in which direct personal reassurance from the shopkeeper is becoming much less available. The AB social category did not rate such guarantees as highly as did the other social groups.

There was a clear difference between the importance attached to the actual selling price and that shown towards recommended and unit prices. This may be an indication that housewives do not want to spend time calculating comparative values; although separate comments were made with regard to the need to know the recommended price in order to check on the validity of price reduction offers.

The response of women from the different categories indicated little difference in attitudes towards the majority of items listed. Class AB women were less likely to be interested in recipes and directions for use and more interested in ingredients. Class C1 women tended to score each item higher than did the other groups.

The results from this particular question were consistent in that items regarded as absolutely essential, or nearly so, featured in the examples preferred by the majority of respondents in a series of contrived labels which they were shown. The series consisted of a number of labels for a particular product— instant mashed potato—differing in the amount of information provided on each label.

INFORMATION VERSUS EXPERIENCE

Factors other than information are taken into consideration when shopping for food and so respondents were asked to rank, in order of importance, a short list consisting of some of these factors as well as some items of information. The ranking was from 1 = most important to 8 = least important and the results are shown in Table II.

It was probably to be expected that "Value for money" would be considered of most importance, closely followed by "Satisfaction based on past experience"—illustrating the prominent role of sound judgment in shopping for food. There was a clear step in ranking between these two aspects and factual information about the product, naturally so, since previous experience assumes prior knowledge. The position occupied by "Ingredients", however, once again underlines the importance attached to knowing what is in a food product.

TABLE II
RANKING OF FACTORS WHEN MAKING SHOPPING DECISIONS

	Averaged ranking
Best value for money	2.1
Satisfaction based on past experience	2.3
Ingredients	3.4
Brand name	3.8
Maker's name	3.9
Cheapest	6
Label design	6.8
Label colour	7.5

The clear step in the ranking of "Cheapest" may reflect that cheapness is equated with poor value and/or poor quality and so is discounted; except when products in a particular category are equally as cheap. In the context of the survey, cheapness should perhaps be interpreted as meaning comparative cheapness.

Label design and colour were rated low in importance by comparison with the other items, but it would be wrong to discount these aspects since poor design and poor colour could probably prejudice an intending purchaser.

No significant differences between social groups were found in the allocated rankings.

UNDERSTANDING OF TERMS USED

Eighty-three per cent. of the women in the survey indicated that they understood most of the information on food labels. Difficulties were associated with the use of descriptions of a technical nature. Thus, whereas about 70 per cent. or more had no problems with terms such as: instant, calorie-reduced, fat, vitamins, colourings and flavourings, the same proportion did not at all understand such descriptions as antioxidants and sodium caseinate. Terms such as carbohydrate and preservative were only partially understood.

ADDITIVES

Ninety per cent. of respondents said they needed to know that food additives were present, mainly (84 per cent.) because they wanted reassurance as to what was in the product. Seventy-six per cent. also considered that each additive should be itemised. The apprehension of only about half of the women would have been dispelled by stating that only legally permitted additives had been used.

INGREDIENTS

When faced with a series of ingredient lists relating to the same product but differing in the detail provided, very few (4 per cent.) of housewives found the simplest of statements acceptable. The largest proportion (47 per cent.) opted for maximum information, including percentage declaration of main ingredients. The rest of the respondents were fairly equally divided amongst

the other alternatives. It was not possible to deduce whether or not the type of detailed information voted for by most of the women reflected genuine comment or was an artefact arising from presenting them with a series of simultaneously visible lists so that comparison was made very easy.

The simplest and the most detailed ingredient lists were as follows:

Beef Stew: Gravy, beef, potatoes and carrots.

Beef Stew: 60 per cent. gravy (water, beef, flour, dried onion, salt, emulsifier, colour, flavouring), 25 per cent. beef, 10 per cent. potatoes, 5 per cent. carrots.

Although it has been a legal requirement for over 20 years to list ingredients in descending order as used, most women in the survey (67 per cent.) were unaware of this. Similarly, few (22 per cent.) realised that some foodstuffs were exempt from this requirement. The majority (82 per cent.) considered that such exemptions should not be allowed.

About a quarter of the women had a particular interest in the presence or absence of certain ingredients. Enquiries in the pilot tests had shown this to be mainly because of family preferences, dietary or religious reasons, but there was evidence in the postal survey that class AB women were more likely to have a special interest.

QUANTITY

A distinct majority (76 per cent.) were in favour of packing foods in prescribed quantities, the main reason given being that it would make value comparisons, and hence shopping, easier. Only about one-third wanted to know the drained weight of canned fruit and vegetables.

GENERAL ASPECTS OF LABELLING

Most respondents (69 per cent.) were satisfied that existing labels provided most of what they wanted to know, and so it would appear that the additional information being sought is seen as a rounding off of a labelling position that is almost, but not quite, adequate. The majority (73 per cent.) also trusted the information provided.

Elderly women were more inclined to consider labels as too crowded, and about one-third of all women expressed visual difficulty in reading printing on food labels, but without attributing any reasons to this. A number of pleas were made for standardisation in the presentation of essential information on labels in order to make shopping easier. The usefulness of labels as part of the shopping list was evident in that 74 per cent. of the housewives indicated that labels act as reminders of products to be bought.

The question of nutritional labelling was deliberately omitted from the questionnaire, in order to see whether or not housewives were sufficiently concerned to raise the topic themselves. None did, which is not to say that a need for such information does not exist. It possibly indicates that, at present, sources other than the label provide adequate information for particular needs, e.g. slimmers, diabetics and young mothers.

Conclusion

The main impression gained from the survey was that food labelling as a whole is not a subject for considerable concern. Housewives are generally satisfied with the quantity and type of information provided. The adequacy of labelling regulations which govern disclosure of almost all of the items ranked as essential is thus underlined. This is not to say that labels answer all questions put by housewives. The survey clearly disclosed urgent needs for:

- (a) the date by which perishable products should be eaten;
- (b) packing more goods in prescribed quantities;
- (c) ingredient details to be in more understandable terms and for some quantitative disclosure.

Subsequent to the survey, there have been positive moves towards fulfilling these needs. The question of percentage declarations and the use of generic terms form part of the current review of food labelling by the Food Standards Committee and these two aspects are also covered by the EEC Directive on the Labelling and Advertising of Food which was adopted by the Council of Ministers in late December 1978. The Directive will also lead to the statutory introduction of date marking.

Housewives do not see why all pre-packed foods should not carry ingredient lists, even though they find difficulty in understanding some of the terms used. The Directive will, very largely, accommodate this point. This particular attitude of housewives may stem partly from the need to know more about convenience foods and also it may reflect concern about the use of food additives and other non-nutritious substances used in the growing and processing of food. They also wanted to know more about such substances and, as was clearly established in the pilot tests, to know about compositional standards.

Perhaps the most important point to emerge was the need for the education of the housewife in this subject to be pursued complementary to legislative changes and to changes in the types and contents of the foodstuffs with which she is faced. Both Authorities and manufacturers would appear to have paid inadequate attention to shoppers' needs in these respects.

More recently the Consumers' Association and the Food Manufacturers' Federation have each evaluated and reported (*Which*, June 1977; FMF Public Image Survey, 1978) on housewives' reactions to particular aspects of food labelling. In both cases the results have confirmed those of the earlier, more comprehensive survey, the details of which are reported in this paper.

