

Health and Wellness awareness has reached an all time high globally in the aftermath of the pandemic. The pandemic has re-aligned the global USD4.5 trillion Health & Wellness market. Consumers globally and in the region are more and more conscious about their food choices and the immediate and long-term impact these hold on their Health and Wellness goals.

Governments globally and in the region have taken direct measures to create awareness among the consumers regarding their food choices amidst growing healthcare expenditure and its subsequent impact on the economy. Proactive efforts by the governments all across the globe, have formulated regulations regarding calorie information at food service restaurants, sugar tax on beverages and promotion of healthier food habits as lifestyle disorders in the region, such as cardiovascular, bone and joint disorders, and diabetes (the combination of diabetes and obesity) reach amongst the highest in the world.

Along the same lines, Health & Wellness packaged foods have moved from the Niche to the Mainstream as consumers become aware of the calorie count and are looking to move away from HFSS (High Fat, Salt & Sugar) in their staple diets. This creates opportunities as well as challenges for the Food manufacturers especially in the processed food sector.

Although packaged foods have always been mandated to provide nutritional facts about their products on the label, the uniformity on such label information has been inconsistent. With consumers gaining unprecedented access to information via hyperconnected knowledge systems on the internet, the demand for information of foods has increased significantly.

Taking Total Fat as example, the total fat category is comprises different types of fat, including saturated fat and trans-fats. Healthier fats like monounsaturated fats (MUFA) and polyunsaturated fats (PUFA) aren't required to be listed, but you can discover any inclusion of "good" fats by subtracting the saturated fat and trans fat amounts from the total fat amount.

While this information is scientifically accurate and acceptable, it lacks coherence and ease of understanding by the consumer i.e. in simple terms it lacks Literacy, which should be the ultimate aim of nutritional labeling. While food manufacturers take the stand that they abide by the directives of the regulatory agencies and regulatory agencies strive to provide ease and comprehension in their guidelines, there needs to be a better framework for consumers to understand the intent and information easily. On that note, the following ABCs of Food Labeling can help align the regulatory, manufacturers and consumers on the same page: A: Accessible & Approved

Food labeling has evolved since the days of simple statements of quality and as the regulatory guidelines evolve and consumer access to nutritional information gets easier due to the internet and information exchange, the role of Food Labeling has to evolve accordingly. Innovations in Data Analytics and QR coding need to be utilized to ensure that the information provided on the label can be linked to an easy to access and technically approved repository of information. Furthermore, this repository needs to be created in an easy to understand language stating the facts about the ingredients of the food product. For example, a ready to cook meal needs to be broken down into individual serving and the contents for each explaining the adequate serving size, published and credible information regarding the benefits and disadvantages of its individual components and the intended use method. This transparency enables better decision making by consumers and also builds inherent trust in the brand. This aspect becomes extremely crucial in product groups such as Organic because the sanctity of Organic foods relies on traceability and trust in origin. Linking a QR code to the Organic certification of the product will promote traceability and transparency which will eventually lead to trust.

B. Brisk & Balanced

The ease of access to information flows equally easily to consumers as well as manufacturers and it may be a tempting value proposition for manufacturers to over-load label information on their products. However, this needs to be avoided to ensure ease of comprehension and actual value add to consumer's decision making. Crisp, easy to understand terminologies within permissible regulatory standards should be used in place of non uniform acronyms and nomenclature. For example, the difference between Sucrose, Maltose and Dextrose may not be too apparent to an average consumer so to enhance the comprehension the labelling can use alternative nomenclature such as simple sugar and complex sugar while also providing the permissible limits and disclaimers. Furthermore, while certain food products are known for a particular health benefit, the labeling on these products should provide a balanced perspective to the consumer to make an informed buying decision. For instance, while Peanuts are rich in healthy fats and are considered a healthier snack than fried foods, Peanut allergies are extremely common and an allergenic response to peanuts can have severe side effects. Possible allergenic responses to foods should be a part of the label so that consumers are aware and consumers with similar or related allergies can make an informed choice about the food group.

C. Calibrated and Comparable

In the age of global connected food systems, imported packaged foods are gaining popularity both in the gourmet and retail sectors. From Ugandan coffee beans to authentic Omani dates, packaged food labeling may vary from geography to geography. This variance includes languages, units of measurement and more. Keeping the above in mind, labelling guidelines need to be calibrated from a global stand point as this enables better comprehension and also aids in positioning. While export guidelines on language vary according to the destination country, the content on the label can be kept uniform and as per the needs of the target market. This also enables better brand positioning for imported products as they are compared by consumers to the locally available brand and can hence create a healthier competitive ecosystem. It's also crucial to understand that labels across identical products need to be kept uniform especially if distributed under the same brand umbrella. For instance, a biscuit manufacturer who also manufactures Wheat Flour needs to have comparable nutritional information on the raw material. This promotes a multi layered value addition approach in addition to avoiding perceived confusion in consumer's mind.

While the ABCs of Label literacy are highlighted through this article, the intent, implication and importance continue to many more points of consideration. The ever growing techno-sphere in food manufacturing and distribution presents many opportunities and avenues of innovation. Some of these can include:

- Utilizing consumer connectivity to make labels easy to share and inspect digitally will have a positive impact on word of mouth marketing.
- Enabling QR codes on physical and e-commerce retail will enable smarter decision making to the consumers.
- Retail chains, both in brick and mortar and e-commerce can utilize the loyalty scheme system to track prevailing purchase patterns and the suggested product list can be created based on nutritional as well as product variant preferences.

The evolution of consumer preference, perceptions and expectations from food labelling is continuous. While successful companies are able to meet the needs, exceptional companies are able to anticipate and adapt at a rapid pace thereby creating a sustainable value proposition and revenue streams. As global regulatory agencies are also evolving from a reactionary to proactive approach, there is an urgent need for the regulators and manufacturers to align and balance the needs of the consumers keeping the ABCs in mind.

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