

Ethics in food labeling and packaging

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Ethical Food Labeling and Packaging After seeing the ad on television or in the weekly grocer flyer, seeing the actual labeling on a product is what consumers have to make informed choices. What started out to be another form of advertising and last attempt to sell a product, food packaging and labeling has been regulated through the FDA and FD&C to require certain information. It was declared to be the policy of the Congress to assist consumers and manufacturers in reaching these goals in the marketing of consumer goods (Regulatory).

Beyond giving the name of the food, net quantity of contents, name and address of manufacturer, statement of ingredients and nutrition information, a product can still be misleading beyond the principal display panels. Accurate and legally complete labels make sense from the standpoints of both ethics and good business (Scott par. 1). Consumers depend on product labels every day to make informed decisions when buying products and those misleading and deceptive labels make it much more difficult to make good purchasing decisions.

Proper labeling to provide the consumer with useful, factual information was the rationale for the original FDCA misbranding provisions, and that motivation has not changed in more than half a century (Committee). Label information can be used to mislead the consumer by providing untrue information or to exaggerate their products' features. As an example, nutrient information claiming "low fat", "100% natural" or "organic" have been used on products that left out pertinent information in supporting those claims.

Unlike 100% Organic, Organic and Made with Organic Processes, which have tight regulations, the FDA has almost no regulations about the use of the word “ natural”. The FDA has not developed a definition for use of the term natural or its derivatives, however the agency had not objected to the use of the term if the food does not contain added color, artificial flavors or synthetic substances (Committee).

A product may contain a claim regarding company processes are green or environmentally friendly, however without the claim being associated to the actual business; consumers are left to think that the product itself lines up with the claim due to mislabeling. There are many cases that the packaging does not represent the actual product. For instance, the packaging of a certain product looks nice and attractive. However, when a consumer opens the package, the product does not look as good as it appears on the packaging.

Common deceptive packaging tricks include encasing small products in large containers or decreasing the amount of the product in a box (Margaret). Manufacturers have downsized their product, yet kept the same price and closely the same package with a new net weight listed, looking very similar to the previously larger size on the shelves not too long ago (Sullivan). As long as the products didn't falsely do all the above and keep the net weight at the same amount, the manufacturer is abiding by the packaging and labeling act.

Slack-filled packaging reveals packaging that looks empty or having less of the product than it could actually contain. Yet again, there are legitimate reasons as to why the consumer pays for air. Companies using same sized

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containers to sell different-sized products to save on packaging costs, added space helps air circulate, preserving freshness and other statements regarding why food items are not packed full can and have been justified (Sullivan).

Sullivan maintains that ultimately the reason is to mislead consumers due to the perception that the larger the box, the better the deal. Concerns about environmental and ethical values are closely related. Customers are increasingly seeking to purchase products from companies that are taking care of our environment (Carbonfree). The Federal Trade Commission regulates environmental marketing claims so consumers can be reasonably confident that any promises apply to most of the packaging or contents of the product and not to “minor, incidental components” (Margaret).

Excessive paper or wrapping and the harms caused by non-biodegradable materials have become a hot topic and companies have realized the public is equally concerned about the ethics of packaging. Not only having safe and effective packaging equipment qualifies companies as being ethical, but the processes and working conditions of employees are under the microscope as well. As an example, a company that produces sugar can have the claim of being “Carbon Free”.

For many consumers, this sounds good and well intentioned, however the claim is not directly for the product but instead meant for how the product was manufactured. Without statements tying the two together the general public will continue to be misled or misinformed. The claim of packaging made out of recycled material when only a small percentage of the container was indeed recycled is a continuation of product misrepresentation and <https://assignbuster.com/ethics-in-food-labeling-and-packaging/>

manufacturers point to shoplifting as an explanation for packing items in difficult-to-open containers (Margaret).

Margaret points out that even this issue leads to the environmental issues of how much energy is being expended to produce, ship and properly store the deceptively large packages. Certain food processes have been tolerated that go against what the product represented and are not mentioned on the food label itself. Within the food industry there isn't a right to know what is in the food as well as the manufacturing processes. Andrews reported that processing aids are substances used to aid food production, which are not found at significant levels in the final product and have no "functional or technical effects" on the food. Lean finely textured beef" (LFTB) otherwise known as "Pink Slime" is produced by mashing and sterilizing beef scraps with ammonia. Even though a large portion of the burger patties produced, including McDonald's up until recently, undergo the ammonia cleanse, there is no need to label it due to the FDA and USDA not requiring food makers to list processing aids on labels (Andrews). The Food Safety and Inspection Service have thirteen categories of processing aids used in the production of meat, poultry and eggs.

Processing aids are defined as a material used to process the food, but having no intentional technical effect on the food itself and having the potential of trace levels to remain in the food after the manufacturing process (Magazine). Based on new government legislations, enhanced media coverage and sensationalism, increased company and personal responsibility and heightened consumer vigilance and demands, the growing global food industry is undergoing a new level of increased controls

through new certifications, standards and moving towards global harmonization (Magazine).

Consumers ought to break out their grocery calculators and see what gets the best bang for the buck instead of flashy packaging and wording that captures the “wants” instead of the “needs” of its consumer base. As Sullivan noted, compare unit prices provided on store shelves as this is the only way to compare a type of product with another. The best thing a consumer can do is vote with their food dollars and to vote smart. As regulations within food packaging and labeling get a closer look it is still up to the consumer to make the decisions best for them and their families.