



Labelling Looks

Fitting angels on the head of a pin is probably easier than trying to fit information on a food label these days. There is so much required information that a food label has grown from a little information hamlet into a congested urban landscape. The prevailing philosophy seems to be: just put the info on the label, bunch it together with lots of supporting information, but make sure everything is of equal type height and prominence. Labels are starting to look like books, not labels where key information should stand out.

The degree of prescription in modern regulations can hamper good label design. So a good label, particularly throughout a brand line, involves emphasis placement and corraling information in a more predictable manner. Under the new federal *Food and Drug Regulations*, “light” claims, and for that matter, most comparative nutrient type claims, must be supported with information such as the per cent or amount difference, the identity of reference food being compared to and the serving size if it differs from the reference food. The regulations require that the supporting information be adjacent to and in type that is of at least the same height and prominence as that of the claim, in this case “light.” The result is a label that used to be clearly distinguished by the word “light,” but is now likely to reduce the size of the claim to comply with type and placement requirements of supporting information. This will certainly make it more difficult for a consumer to distinguish between a regular and “light” version of a product when having to make quick purchasing decisions. A better option would be to unhinge all this information so that the claim “light” can appear in a more prominent type followed by the per cent difference in fat or energy, as the case may be, in type perhaps no less than half that of the term “light.” The remainder of the supporting information could then perhaps be placed on



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the lower third of the main panel, if that is where the claim is made, in a type size no less than an eight point regular type face. The regulations need clarity on establishing key information and to allow that information to stand out.

Under the existing regulations the use of the bottom of a container for the presentation of mandatory information is prohibited except in very specific cases. If the nutrition facts table may be presented on the bottom of a container, then why not the ingredient list or the dealer name and address statement? The issue had been visited a number of years ago, but with no success – it should be revisited.

The regulations should recognize and accommodate alternative labelling practices if they make sense. For example, when an artificial sweetener such as aspartame is added to a food the amount in mg must be expressed on a per serving of stated size basis and the fact that aspartame contains phenylalanine must also be stated. Technically this information must be grouped with other mandatory information. The practice of commingling the information within the ingredient list is technically incorrect, but clearly less redundant than repeating it.

Good information is important for consumers to make appropriate choices about the foods they purchase. For the most part the information itself is not in question. However, good information in a cluttered mess is self-defeating. A clear distinction between key information and secondary supporting information and how such information may be presented would certainly help draw out the facts for consumers who in seconds make purchasing decisions.

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