



# Battling the Bulge

*Industry shouldn't underestimate the power of nutrition labels in fighting obesity*

As Canada readies itself for mandatory nutrition labelling (MNL), which takes effect the end of this year, the U.S. is "tweaking" its own. After more than a decade of MNL under its belt, our U.S. neighbours' average girth has reached its zenith. Obesity has become a big issue in the U.S., and U.S. legislators aim to fix it. It should be of interest to us since we are following closely in the heavy footsteps of our southern friends with MNL. Obesity is a problem in Canada and most prosperous nations.

A recent ACNielsen Online Consumer Opinion Survey polled Canadians, as well as respondents in Asia Pacific, Europe, the U.S., Latin America and South Africa. The results are fascinating. My impression is that globally we are aware of nutrition information, but either fail to understand it or fail to use it to make wise food choices. Not surprisingly 65 per cent of Americans rated themselves the highest in terms of understanding nutrition information. Canadians came in third at 61 per cent. At such a high, albeit self-proclaimed level of understanding of nutrition information, you would think North Americans should be a model of health and fitness, not girth and fatness. The survey seems to indicate that consumers are using labelling information, but likely on their own terms and understanding.

I recall when NLEA (the U.S. Nutrition Labeling and Education Act) was introduced in the early '90s and "fat" was the baddest of the bad nutrients. The survey indicates that fat is still the one North Americans look out for the most. Calories also rate high, but not as high as in Latin America. Unlike in the early days of nutrition labelling where you had the good and bad nutrients, today's nutrition labelling requires a far more sophisticated understanding. Things are not so simple. We have good fat (the polys) and bad (sats and trans), and good carbs (starches and fibre) and bad (sugar). Actually sugar is not that bad: it's in the apple I just ate. But too much of it is.

Obesity is a great concern as it is related to virtually all major diseases in North America (heart disease, cancer, diabetes, etc.). Nutrition information was introduced to make us healthier. Ironically we seem to have done better without it. What is a bit puzzling is that North Americans only look at nutrition information 21 per cent of the time when diet-

ing. It's like Canadians who manage to smoke in spite of some pretty horrible pictures on the package.

In addition, only 22 per cent of consumers look at nutrition information all the time and only 12 per cent when buying food for their children. There is room for improvement here. The question then is how to label foods to accommodate consumers (simplifying the information) and influence them to make better food choices.

That's the question in front of U.S. regulators. They want more attention placed on total calories. Caloric intake for Americans is seen as the number one villain in the battle against obesity. There has even been some discussion on making it mandatory to highlight the total calorie content per serving on the main panel. This option is not seen as favourable as it may take emphasis away from other nutrients that are just as important. What will likely be more reasonable is the elimination of the requirement to include calories from fat on a nutrition facts panel, which is something optional in Canada, and to provide a per cent daily value for calories, which is currently not on the menu in the U.S. or Canada. Single-serve packages may require special labelling to provide a clearer

relationship to reference amounts customarily consumed. In the next few years you can bet your American dollar that calorie information will be an enhanced label feature as the U.S. struggles with the battle of the bulge. Although the term "portion controlled serving" is not highly regarded in the U.S., I would hazard a guess that emphasis on serving size is bound to grow.

Good health is related to more than just food: it's related to the environment, activity, minimizing stress, etc. However, food labelling, and in particular nutrition labelling, has a significant unrealized potential in influencing consumers' food choices and in developing foods with better nutritional values. Governments do need to be more on the frontline with consumer education. This will be as important to the success of such information as putting the darn thing on the label in the first place.

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