

*Evaluation of Consumers' Awareness on Importance of
Reading Food Labeling in the Kumasi Metropolis (Ghana)*

V. Commey, Sunyani Polytechnic, Ghana
M. Frimpong, Sunyani Polytechnic, Ghana
J.A. Hagan, Sunyani Polytechnic, Ghana

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Abstract

Many diseases are diet related and can be managed or prevented by eating the right food. Sufficient information is needed at the point of purchase to guide the consumer. But how many people read food labels? This research assessed consumers' level of awareness on the importance of reading food labels. 400 respondents were selected purposively to assess their level of awareness in reading food labels, 50 respondents were observed on buying behavior. It was found out that all, 100% respondents has appreciable knowledge on food labels. 95% check food labels before purchasing. 85% and 75% check list of ingredients and expiry date respectfully. The results indicated that people are getting more informed and health conscious, however, forgetfulness, negligence and time constraints were the barriers to reading food labels. The researchers recommended future study on people's behavior towards reading of food labels, consumer awareness educational campaign to help overcome these barriers.

Keywords: Food labels, eating patterns, sufficient information, health consciousness, consumer awareness campaign, educational forums

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recent evidence points to poor diet as a risk factor for chronic diseases that are the leading causes of adult deaths: heart disease, stroke, hypertension, diabetes and some forms of cancers and together, these disorders account for two thirds of all deaths in affluence societies. The great tragedy is that these diseases are often preventable or slowed down through diet and physical exercise. For example the only dietary change effective in reducing many types of cancer and increasing life span is caloric restriction (Wardlaw, Hampl, & Di Silvestro 2004). As consumers are becoming aware of their nutritional habits their demand for nutrition information has increase.

According to (AL Tamimi & Company, 2004) information on food labels help consumers to a better understand of the nutritional value of the food and also enable them to compare the nutritional values of similar food product based on the relevant nutrition information on the choices of food. However another advantage of reading food labels also prevents consumers from choosing counterfeit products which can be dangerous to their health.

The World Health Organization has reported that dietary factors accounted for approximately 30% of cancers in industrialized countries. Consumers today are very interested in nutrition and health. Increased consumer interest in health has resulted in the greater availability of foods lower in energy content, sodium and fat and higher dietary fiber.

However most pre-packaged food products locally and imported manufactured are now provided with nutrition information on their food labels. But there are many important diet related diseases such as cancers, diabetes, poor nutrition, osteoporosis, cardiovascular and obesity high blood pressure (WHO/FAO 2003).

A study by Cowburn and Stockley (2003) reported that the use of nutrition labels in Europe is high but more objective measures suggest that actual use of nutrition labelling during food purchase may be much lower. Whether or not consumers can understand and use nutrition labelling depends on the purpose of the task. Available evidence suggests that consumers who do look at nutrition labels can understand some of the terms used but are confused by other types of information. Most people appear to be able to retrieve simple information and make simple calculations and comparisons between products using numerical information, but their ability to interpret the nutrition label accurately reduces as the complexity of the task increases.

The most challenging issue facing the food industry involves labelling. To capture consumers' interest, the food industry spends well over six billion dollars annually on advertising and another twenty six billion on packaging and labelling though some of these advertising is helpful as they promote the importance of calcium and fibre in our diets and also encourage the consumption of low-fat and non-fat products, fruits and vegetables, others also tend to emphasize brand-name foods especially highly sweetened cereals, cookies ,cakes and pastries because they bring higher profits to them (Wardlaw, 1997).

The impact of globalization on consumers all over the world requires necessary action to be taken by countries to improve manufacturing products including food. This will enable them to compete in the open market. Food labeling is a beneficial to both

manufacturers and consumers, in that it encourages manufactures to improve the nutrient profile of their product and direct consumers to make good choices (Washi 2012).

In Ghana the regulatory bodies of food and drugs are Ghana Standards Board (GSB) and Food and Drugs Board (FDB) and their constitutionally mandated responsibilities should be enforced in order to ensure good food on the market. On the other hand consumers are to pay needed attention and critically examine food before purchase (Mensah, et al 2012).

It is important to realize that labelling is not education. In the US, the FDA has determined that information on food labels should be simple, meaningful and consistent. Labels on foods that have not been changed in any way through the use of biotechnology would likely be perceived as alarming and irrelevant (Hoban, 1996a).

Research have however shown that factors such as time, familiarly, lack of understanding and lack of conducive point- of- purchase are some of the impediments that affect consumers ability to observe food labels before purchase and consumption. (Deede, 2009)

There are basic information by law on what must be found on labels such as the name of the product, name and address of the manufacturer, amount of product in the package, ingredients and the date of manufacture and expiry of the product and sometimes the nutritional facts of the product. All these information must be written in the language that consumers will understand in order for them to make informed decision on their choice of food product for better diet and better health.. It has been observed that most consumers do not have the time to read labels of food before they purchase them. Can this mean consumers do not see, understand, trust or use the information provided on food labels? It is against this background that this research seeks to assess consumers' level of awareness on the importance of reading food labels. The aim of the study was to assess consumers' level of awareness on the importance of reading food labels. To find out how food labels affect consumers' choice of food product, the importance consumers attach to reading food labels before purchase and usage of packaged foods and the barriers to reading food labels before purchase and or use.

2. LITERATURE

There are a number of research works that have been carried out on food labels. Labels of one sort or another according to Curran, McVay, Deeps, Wallace and Rumble (2003) have been around for over 600 years. The earliest labeling devices were unique markings and personalized seals that identified the marketer of a particular product. The information conveyed by the labels according to Cheftel (2004), has evolved over time, as the objectives became more numerous and more complex under the influence of various pressure groups such as food companies, retail groups, public authorities and consumer organizations. Initially, it was necessary to inform consumers about the nature and composition of the products to avoid confusion and protect them against misuses, risks and abuses. Marketing information was provided, together with provisions for safe storage, handling and cooking. Precise indications on the characteristics of the foods were also requested as a mean to

promote fair trade and prevent frauds. With mass industrial food production, the generalization of low temperature and other food preservation technologies, together with the development of packaging materials and techniques, opened the way to modern food labeling. Recent times have seen the emergence of a new concept: the consumer's right to information, allowing "informed choice" in full knowledge of the facts. This right has taken many forms i.e. real or "perceived" safety information of ingredients and additives, philosophical or ethical concerns, nutrition information and declaration of potential allergies. Further information is on its way such as nutrition and health claims with relevance to obesity and the risk of various diseases, the recent occurrence of several food crises has emphasized food safety and protection of consumers' health as main objectives for the food legislation.

Labelling is defined by the EU Directive 2000/13/EC as any words, particulars, trademarks, brand name, pictorial matter or symbol relating to a foodstuff and placed on any packaging, document, notice, label, ring or collar accompanying or referring to such foodstuff.

Kotler and Kellar (2006) posited that as a simple tag attached to the product or an elaborate designed graphic that is part of the package. The label might carry only the brand name or a great deal of information. Even if the manufacturer prefers a simple label, the law may require additional information

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Pre-packaged foods stuff on the other hand is any single item for presentation such to the ultimate consumer and mass caterers, consisting of foodstuff and the packaging in which it was put before being offered for sale, whether such packaging encloses the foodstuff completely or partially, but in any case in such a way that the contents cannot be altered without opening or changing the packaging.

As consumers focus more and more on diet and disease, manufactures are churning out products that claim all sorts of health benefits (Wardlaw, 1997). Many shoppers now look at food labels for information about content and preparation, reflecting the growing interest in healthy eating as well as concern about what ingredients are in the foods they eat (Crag, Ross and Dawn 2004). The FSA's Consumers Attitude Survey (TNS Research, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005c, 2006b) found that over half of respondents always or often looked at food labels before purchasing items. Women are much more likely to read labels than men; this is especially true of women with children, who look at labels to see whether a food contains sugar or 'E' numbers (Synovate, 2005). However, some people who check food labels do so simply to check the 'best before date' (TSN Research, 2006).

3. Methods and materials

3.1 Population and sampling

The target population for the study comprised all consumers within the Kumasi metropolis who are consumers who purchase food products. This population was used

because it is believed that in one way or the other they purchase packaged food products for themselves and or for their family members

3.2 The study area: is Kumasi metropolis in the Ashanti region The inhabitants of this study area are mostly workers from the private and public sector, students, traders and non-workers as well, and they are all consumers of packaged food products.

3.3 Research Design

Descriptive survey was used for the study. This type of research design according to Okai, 2010 is a planned attempt to analyze and interpret the current status of a thing, object, people or institution .Because of its fact-finding characteristics in nature, the design describes the prevailing situation and suggests remedial measures or alternative courses or action. This design helped to assess the characteristics, attitudes and knowledge of consumers on food labeling.

3.4 Sampling technique

Purposive sampling method was used to select 200 households and at least 2 respondents from each household for the study. This technique was used because all the members of the population were consumers who patronized food products every now and then and using this method was a fair representation of the population.400 respondents were used in the study with at least one person from each household. Observation and interview were conducted in three shops to observe the buying behavior of consumers.

3.5 Data collection instrument

Questionnaire and observation were the instruments used to collect data from the respondents. The questionnaire contained both open and close-ended questions. It was designed based on the objectives of the study. Non-Participant observation was also used to assess consumer's attitude on the importance they placed on reading food labels at the point-of –purchase at 3 selected grocery stores. This supports what Sproull said cited in Okai, (2010) that observation method is a data collection method in which a person observes subjects or phenomena and records information about characteristics of the phenomena.

3.5 Data analysis procedure

Data collected were edited coded and fed into the computer using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Tables, graphs and charts were used to give visual impression of the data. Frequencies and percentages were used to analyze the data and results presented descriptively.

4.0. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The paper presents the analysis and findings of the study in the form of tables and charts using the respective percentages. The total number of respondents for the study was 400, of which 300responded to the questionnaire and 50 persons were observed at the point- of –purchase.

4.1 Demographic data of respondents

The general characteristics such as gender, age, educational background, occupation, etc. for the respondents of questionnaire for the study are presented in this section.

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (n=400)

VARIABLE	FREQUENCY	PERCENT
Gender		
Female	350	54.3
Male	150	45.7

IMPORTANCE CONSUMERS ATTACH TO READING FOOD LABELS

Table 4.1 depicts that the most considered factor that influenced their purchase of packaged food products was the label information on the package.

All (100%) the respondents indicated that they know, at least, a little about what food labeling is and that about 95% of them indicated that they would not buy a food product with no label description.

About 5% on the other hand, indicated that they do not mind if a food product does not come with a label description.

Table 4.1: Motivation (influence) for buying packaged foods

	Percent of Respondents	
	Frequency	Percent
Price	56	14.5
Label information	156	40.3
Taste	15	3.9
Appearance	54	13.9
Convenience	56	14.5
Brand name	50	12.9
Total	387	102.4

Source: Field Work, 2011

CONSUMERS KNOWLEDGE ON FOOD LABEL REQUIREMENTS

There is an indication that consumers have some appreciable knowledge on food label requirements in that all (100%) of the respondents indicated that they know, at least, a little about what food labeling is (from Fig. 4.2).

This point to the fact that they have some fair knowledge on food labeling this confirms the studies by Nielson,2005 cited by Mhurchu, 2006, in a pan-country study, Prathiraja and Ariyawardana (2003) and Edcoms (2007) with similar findings that only 8%, 2% and 5% respectively said they never look at food labels but refuting the findings of Banka (2011) which indicated that most consumers do not bother to go

through food labels and that these labels remain as mere “decorations” on the containers.

Table 4.2: Food Label Feature that should appear on Labels

Feature	Percent of Respondents	
	Frequency	
Name of product/food	326	84.2
List or Amount of Ingredients	310	80.6
Manufacture and Expiry Dates	330	85.2
Name of manufacturer/Business	210	54.3
Batch number	210	54.3
Place of Origin	274	70.8
Instructions for Use	268	69.2

Source: Field Work, 2011

BARRIERS TO READING FOOD LABELS BEFORE PURCHASE OR USE

It was observed that consumers mainly looked at only two label features at the point of purchase i.e. Name of manufacturer of product and dates of manufacture and expiry features.

It can be inferred that consumers did not read the other label features because of not having enough time ,being familiar with the product or do not know the purpose of the rest of the label features because of their educational background.

The findings from the observational study also showed that consumers who mainly shop are young adults and the middle age with mostly secondary school and primary educational levels.

It was observed that consumers mainly looked at only two label features at the point of purchase i.e. Name of manufacturer or product and dates of manufacture and expiry features. All these point to the fact that they have some fair knowledge on food labeling since it would be quite meaningless to take a keen interest in something one knows nothing about, this confirms the studies by Nielson,2005 cited by Mhurchu, 2006, in a pan-country study, Prathiraja and Ariyawardana (2003) and Edcoms (2007) with similar findings that only 8%, 2% and 5% respectively said they never look at food labels but refuting the findings of Banka (2011) which indicated that most consumers do not bother to go through food labels and that these labels remain as mere :decorations” on the containers.

CONCLUSIONS

The study revealed that though consumers consider several factors such as price, taste, convenience, etc. the most considered factor that influenced their purchase of packaged food products was the label information on the package.

Also, all the respondents know, at least, a little about what food labeling is and that though a few indicated that they do not mind if a food product does not come with a label description, majority of them indicated that they would not buy a packaged food product with no label description.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study mainly concentrated on assessing consumers' level of awareness on the importance of reading food labels. It is recommended that future research be further carried out on the practices of consumers in their homes to find out if what they claim to do is really practiced.

Since education appeared to have positive influence on the importance consumers place on reading food labels, more attention should be given to educational programs. Consumers should be given more education on the importance of reading food labels.

Familiarity with the product should not be used as excuse for not reading food labels as some of the ingredients in the products may be changed with time. Shopping centers must also have allocated spaces for consumers who may want to sit or stand to read labels on food packages before purchases.

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