

Understanding Northern Ireland Consumer Needs Around Food Labelling

Area of research interest: [Behaviour and perception](#)

Study duration: 2016-01-01

Planned completion: 1 July 2016

Project code: FS303014

Conducted by: TNS BMRB

Background

The EU Food Information for Consumers Regulation brings together EU rules on general food labelling and nutrition labelling into one piece of legislation. The majority of the requirements have applied since December 2014, with nutrition labelling requirements becoming mandatory as of December 2016.

Considering the review and updating of all labels by industry to comply with the Food Information for Consumers Regulations (FIC), the Food Standards Agency (FSA) in NI commissioned primary research to establish current consumer awareness and understanding of food labelling on retail packs.

This research will feed into a future communications plan that addresses any gaps in consumer understanding or misunderstandings of current labelling. The findings aim to support the use of labels for empowered consumer decision making.

Research approach

The objectives were to:

1. Explore consumer awareness, understanding and views of retail food labelling and how this currently affects purchasing decisions. Specifically, the research explores the following components of labelling:
 - Country of origin
 - Allergen information (including precautionary allergen labelling)
 - Nutrition information
 - Products on promotions
 - Instructions for use
 - Date of minimum durability (use by or best before)
2. Understand consumer views about the importance of information on labels
3. Provide insight around the drivers of consumer views and sources of any misconceptions/misunderstandings
4. Explore any issues regarding the user-friendliness of food labels in relation to font size, colour, layout and language

5. Provide a baseline understanding of consumer knowledge and understanding of labelling and support the FSA's ability to provide future consumer education and support campaign around labelling that meets consumer needs
6. Achieve the aims and objectives, a mixed-method approach was chosen comprising qualitative research to explore current knowledge, attitudes and perceptions in detail and quantitative research to establish measures for each of the objectives with a larger sample of consumers.

Stage 1: qualitative research – focus groups and accompanied shops

The qualitative research included:

- 8x 1.5 hour focus groups of eight people each, across four locations in Northern Ireland with a total of 64 participants. In the focus groups participants were presented with a range of stimuli food packaging and asked to prioritise information
- 8 x accompanied shops (4x online shoppers and 4x in-store shoppers) followed by face-to-face interviews with these individuals. These helped to understand the drivers of decision making in depth as it was important to observe the decision-making process first hand - i.e. the customer journey leading up to the point of purchase in this instance. Participants were observed doing a 'normal shop' and a follow-up interview of around 45 minutes was conducted to help understand their purchasing decisions and use of labelling information across their shop

Participants were recruited to include a mix of those who primarily do their shopping online and those who primarily shop in supermarkets (conducting both large weekly shops and smaller more regular shops) and included a mix of:

- Demographic variables – including a mix of socioeconomic groups, age and life-stage (e.g. younger/older children at home; adult children out of home)
- Whether people suffered from allergies

All research participants recruited had primary/joint responsibility for their household shop.

Stage 2: quantitative research – using the FSA panel

A 10-minute questionnaire was developed which was conducted with a nationally representative sample of 201 Northern Ireland consumers from the FSA Consumer Panel. This questionnaire aimed to uncover:

- Consumer awareness of food labelling
- Use of food labelling when making purchasing decisions
- Perceptions of which information is most important to include on labels.

The online survey was conducted with a representative cross-section of consumers. This was monitored by collecting house and demographic information for every panellist. The data was weighted by age, gender, whether participants were responsible for their household shops and whether they were cooking or preparing foods for someone with an allergy.

This data was then analysed alongside the qualitative data to cross-reference findings across the phases, ultimately integrating both phases of the research to provide holistic, robust insight into participant views.

Results

Overall, participant attention to labelling information appeared to be driven by a particular need, for example, if participants were following a specific diet or had specific dietary or allergen requirements. Outside of these circumstances, participants tended only to use labels to check the “use by” or “best before” dates and occasionally checked labels when buying new or unfamiliar products.

Reasons for not checking labelling information included:

- people routinely buying familiar products and therefore not considering it necessary to check product information
- people perceiving labels to be overly numerical or requiring complex calculations

Despite these barriers, there was a general overall appetite for increased provision of labelling information, especially nutrition information and portion size as a consequence of current social trends towards maintaining a healthier diet. Participants expressed a need for greater visualisation and simplification of data which could encourage more informed, regular usage of labelling information.

Research report

Research report

PDF

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