

Consumer Looks at Labeling

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Having been one of those horrible persons who failed to read the label on the bottle - after I had staggered out of bed to administer the once every 4 hours dosage of medicine to my little girl - then realized only after she had dutifully taken it that it was a teaspoonfull of an antiseptic rather than the prescribed medicine, I realized belatedly the importance of the label. Fortunately there were no ill effects for my stupidity.

Actually to answer the question, "Do Consumers look at labels?" I would state categorically that a sufficient number of consumers do look at labels to make labeling rather significant in market acceptance of products. That is, market research studies prove conclusively that labeling of products significantly affects the acceptance of products in the market.

Is the Label Informative?

Probably there are no students of marketing who would deny the attention-getting role of labels. In today's super-market method of selling, it is the label that makes the product literally outstanding and improves the chances of that product's being transferred from shelf to market basket.

Beyond this, however, there is less agreement. Do the labels contain factual information and is the information so presented as to help the buyer make better buys? (Implicit here is a definition of an efficient buyer: one who secures products in the market which meet the buyer's declared need at minimum expenditure of time, money and effort. And a better buy is a product equally satisfactory as another in meeting the buyer's needs, but procured at less expenditure of time, money or effort.)

If the product to be purchased is to meet a need, judgement must be passed as to whether the product will meet the specifications. An essential requirement for packaged products, whose important characteristics are hidden, is that the labels should be factual. Are the facts correct? Are they presented so as to yield a reasonably true statement of the whole? Are the facts specific enough for those technically competent to understand, yet sufficiently clear that a non-technically trained individual can interpret the information on the label for his own use?

Can Consumer Use the Facts Properly?

The next question is not whether the objective facts are true, correct and proper, but whether the interpretation of those facts will guide the buyer to a wise choice, or mislead him. This is a matter of semantics, admittedly. But to classify it doesn't face the issues involved: One aspect is the words used (stimulus) the other is the impact these words have on the buyer (the response). The word ham to Iowans means corn fed; to a southerner it means peanut fed, and the two hams do not taste alike. For proper communication either the words used must be those which convey to the respondent ideas in the form the respondent is accustomed to hearing, or this respondent must be trained (or educated) to give the proper interpretation to the words. The first approach is usually the easiest although the educator usually

takes the second. In my own profession, for example, only some social scientists continue to insist that the standard of living represents what man is striving for and does not represent man's present level of consumption, which is its popular usage. Misunderstandings will arise if words are used which are not understood and if consumer education fails to keep the public informed as to the meaning and use of the new words.

Often I have asked students to compare the labels of a synthetic orange drink which gave specific information on the Vitamin C content with the label on cans of actual orange juice which did not state the Vitamin C content. After reading the labels carefully they were to report which of the two contained the more Vitamin C per ounce. The synthetic drink with its explicit statement of its Vitamin C content was considered to be higher in C than the straight juice. Whereas in fact, the straight juice contained many more times as much Vitamin C.

Because of the variations in the literacy, cultural heritage, personalities of the public at large are variations in interpretations the public will give to seemingly clear statements. This raises the question of whose ears and eyes are to be taken as the norm. Some I have known declared they never would buy juices labeled "sugar added" because they preferred a tart juice. On the other hand there are others who, because they liked a sweet juice, sought out juice labeled "sugar added". One group assumed "sugar added" to mean a sweeter juice; the other assumed the juice to be so tart initially that it needed sugar to bring it up to a tolerable level of sweetness. Thus the simple words, "sugar added" convey different meanings to persons of different tastes.

Can Labels Report Everything?

Up to this point I have assumed that we know what it is that we wish to convey. Yet, however much we may wish to describe a product attribute, that attribute must be identifiable and measureable if it is to be declared accurately on the label. For example, flavor is undoubtedly one of the most important characteristics of food products. Yet until methods are devised for objective declaration of flavor, it is impossible to convey through labeling the flavor quality of the product.

Probably one of the most significant developments with respect to measurement of product characteristics in the textile field has been in the work of the American Standards Association L22 committee. This committee has developed performance standards for the industry. So, for the first time, the members of the industry have a common language and can communicate effectively. Eventually the consumer may be let in on the conversation. At least it is a possibility now that the technological problems of identification and measurability and of standardized test procedures have been developed. Now it is possible to speak precisely about shrinkage, cease resistance, air permeability, etc., with respect to specific uses.

In summary the problems of adequacy of labeling are intimately related to standardization. Standardization initially requires identification of the product characteristics important to the consumer. Then these attributes must be isolated and measured under consumer use conditions within limits which are not discriminable by a predetermined proportion of or a specified group of consumers. Quality control techniques must be developed so the product attribute can be standardized in production within tolerance limits. Finally there is the semantics problem of using the proper words to convey the proper idea to the buyer whom it is hoped will be a more competent buyer for having read and understood the words on the label.

The Simple Problems of Labeling

Up to this point I have tended to emphasize the complexity of the problem and its enormity. These account for some of the reasons we have not made more rapid progress in improved labeling. On the other hand there are areas of inadequate labeling which cannot be excused for lack of research.

Why do we have mandatory labeling of the animal produced fiber, wool, but do not for the man-made synthetic fibers, produced under modern industry quality control methods? Why must the consumer await the efforts of the L22 committee for performance standards of fibers and blends? Why not tell her what the fibers and blends are, so that she and her dry-cleaner will at least know what the fibers are?¹ None of the basic problems mentioned earlier are involved. For this failure to identify the fibers there is no excuse other than general failure of the entire industry to perform to the best interest of the consumer. The spokesmen of industry often say we would gladly supply such information if only the consumer complained sufficiently to the retailer. I have greater faith in the manner in which the American consumer shepherds her funds to assume that she has not asked repeatedly for such information, only to be told by the clerk, "Honey, this will wash and dry clean beautifully". My wife met a more understanding clerk in a larger department store in Topeka last month, "If they won't put on the label the fiber, the least they could do would be to give laundry instructions!"

Labels expressing items clearly and unambiguously are of little value unless the terms stand the test of consistent usage. That is, terms used, although not ambiguous in themselves, are of little value to the consumer unless they represent the same fact consistently. Thus whether the terms are valid or not, they will serve as reliable guides for the consumer. Recently I had the job of serving as part-time homemaker while my wife recovered from a bout with the flu. I found that I could substitute in many of the areas of the homemakers work. But when it came to sorting out our three girls' clothes I was a dismal failure. As my wife said, holding two pairs of the children's pants, one much larger than the other, "If you had read the label, you would have put these two pairs in the same drawer because they are both labeled Size 6. But one is Mary's and the other is Susan's." Both carried the same store label, the same size and yet one fitted a fourth grader and the other a first grader. Of what value is it to use such a clear and unambiguous term as Size 6, if it is not employed consistently? Furthermore, there is a history of extensive research on body dimensions on which to base standard sizes.

"Of course if both store and brand are mixed, even more curious things can happen." The last time we bought sweaters for two of the girls, we bought a size 7 and a size 10. The fifth grade girl who is much larger than her sister is wearing the size 7, while the size 10 is a perfect fit for the fourth grader. These are but two examples of inadequate labeling which involve no fundamental technical problems that must be solved to permit improved labeling.

There are many other examples of inadequate consumer labeling. Furs were a notorious example until federal legislation was enacted. But why must I weigh out soap in a store to evaluate the economy of the economy size? Is this too much to ask of the modern industry to package its soaps in standard weight sizes and so inform me? (Incidentally, I wonder why they prefer not to quote even ounces or simple fractions of pounds). For fun I ran a test one day and found that it

¹See "What does the Consumer Want in Textile Labeling?" by Francis E. Simmons American Viscose Corporation, 1617 Pennsylvania Blvd., Philadelphia 3, Pa. for limitations of fiber identification and advantages of performance standards. (Bul. No. 3250, Jan. 1957).

took almost one-half minute to find the weight on a Giant Economy Size box of a detergent. There in small print, dwarfed by free offers and gimmicks, it reads: "net weight, 3 lbs. $1\frac{1}{4}$ ozs.". I ask you, at 77¢ a box, how much is this an ounce? Just three quarters of an ounce more and it would have been an even 50 ounces, but this would have made comparative shopping for the customer too easy.

The labeling of foods is generally fairly good, thanks to the Food & Drug Administration. While utopia has not been achieved, the fill-of-container provisions are violated, net weight of contents are often obscurely stated, the minimum of information required does not permit efficient comparative shopping, yet there is an attempt to be informative and not misleading. Frequently in packages that appear to be only partially filled is a slip of paper explaining that the package was full at the time of shipment. A label that thoroughly amused my wife and me was one we found on a can of rhubarb. On the label was pictured a dish of red rhubarb. From this dish a big arrow pointed to a form letter, addressed: "Dear Customer: We don't want to mislead you with our beautiful label. Let's be truthful. We are apologetic that the red color of the fresh Rhubarb pictured is not captured by modern canning methods. You may find a slight pink color but don't be disappointed if the Rhubarb is green without a tinge of red."

This indicates to me that our manufacturers have come to feel that the public expects truthful representation of the product on the food label, and that possible misrepresentation must be explained.

Industry - Look at Your Consumer Labels

In the first section I mentioned many of the theoretical problems of adequate labeling. In the second section I tried to emphasize that there is much that could be labeled. In this closing section I would like to discuss with industry a consumer's viewpoint on labeling. My assignment permits me to single out only a few comments at this time.

1. To those industry spokesmen who claim that consumers do not look for information on labels, I say you are probably right. But do not deny the few consumers who would like to be informed from becoming so economically. Learning is an expensive and painful process, so the efficient buyer may not become informed if the cost of getting the information is excessive. And I for one consider turning for information about a product from sources other than on the label to be excessive.

2. Industry can help reduce the cost of becoming informed buyers by improved labeling. For example, I have heard many times that there are different types of salmon: chum, pink, sockeye, etc, but minutia is difficult to remember. If industry would insist that the label bear a statement to the effect that there are several types of salmon and perhaps, give the use for which each type is best suited, I could match my needs with the information and buy intelligently repeatedly. This is the type of labeling which the National Consumer Retailer Council required. It facilitated comparison by consumers.

3. The A & P was one of the leading chains to use NCRC approved labels. It also employed ABC grade labeling beginning in 1934. However, about two years ago A & P labels were changed, omitting the grade and the explanation of the grade, and leaving the label essentially the same in color and format but without the information. It is reported that the Consumer Relations Department of the national headquarters of that company when asked about this made the following statement:

"It has been our feeling for some time that the grade labeling on our own products has outlived its usefulness and has not been worthwhile

inasmuch as we were about the only ones left in the industry with grade designations on canned goods.

You may be assured, however, that there have been no changes in the quality of our products and that they are equal and, in many cases, better than nationally advertised brands."

It is significant that the one company which had taken leadership in informative and grade labeling in the formative years of grade labeling had deemed it advisable to discontinue its policy at this late date. I doubt that headquarters received many letters of protest and undoubtedly those in headquarters who advised the change in policy could feel justifiably proud that the transition was so smooth that few were aware of the change. Earlier in this talk I mentioned that I had used stores as a laboratory for teaching buymanship and because A&P did grade label and use NCRC approved labels this store was always visited. The first semester I thought the students were having unusual difficulty spotting grade labels. But by second semester it was apparent to me that there had been a change in store policy. The manager was an exceedingly alert gentleman and always ready to be of help, so we asked him about the seeming disappearance of grade labels. He denied our observation, then investigated and reported to the class at a later time that the grade labeling program had stopped over a half year ago. It had been accomplished without even the store manager knowing the change had been made.

This means to me that a wise shopper will not read the label each time. An efficient shopper will invest time to study out a problem, arrive at a solution, then continue in habitual pattern until there is reason to re-study the problem. A & P had over the years indoctrinated the public to associate with the names A & P, Sultana and Iona with A, B, and C so will that they were able to drop the ABC without disturbing the public's memory tool which was the color and private label of the A & P label. Absence of complaint by the consumer testifies to me the merit of ABC labeling, that it had in helping the public recognize subtly the use of the product and the use of the private brand name designators.

4. Much has been argued about grade vs standardized descriptive labeling. In addition there has been informative labeling, brand name labeling, both national and private, and seals of acceptance, guarantees, etc. One might think from reading the literature in the late 1930's and early 40's that these were mutually exclusive labels. Grade labeling it was predicted would perhaps mean the end of brand labeling.

Since that time we have all learned some things. We have learned that, not everyone would buy just grade A and avoid grades B and C if they were informed as to the meaning of the grades and if products are priced according to grade. We have learned that some will prefer to buy a certain brand of product even at a higher price and despite a label which will show it to have the same ingredients as the less well known brand available at less cost. We have learned that brand named merchandise does not assume permanence of an establishment and guarantee for that product is perpetuity. Faith in a brand as such may be misplaced.

We have learned that there are major theoretical obstacles to ABC labeling. Seldom do consumer preference run in the order of A, B, C, that is, the assumed linearity of preferences is not valid. The sophisticated buyer will never be content with the pooled-score method of simplified quality ratings. He would be content, however, with standardized descriptive statements regarding those quality characteristics of critical importance to him. On the other hand we know that a minority of consumers need the detailed description of all the essential quality character-

istics, and a majority would be helped considerably by the simplified grade labeling of ABC. Seals of acceptances still have their following among those confused buyers who need assurance beyond that of their trust in the retailer, their confidence in the brand, their faith in advertising, and their own judgement.

5. Now that we have learned that labels which use terms that enable the consumer to shop and compare qualities does not spell doom to an industry, I would ask that each industry take leadership in (1) finding out what consumers consider to be the more critical properties of the product, (2) develop standards for these characteristics that can be used in production to control the quality of the product, (3) identify these standardized and essential characteristics by a descriptive name then (4) insist that this description nomenclature be used on all products of the industry so the consumer can be sure that the absence of standardized names mean unacceptable standard. When a salesman tried to tell me that the Hi-Fi set met the U-L specification but the leading manufacturer chose not to use the label, I knew the salesman was in error, and (5) Insofar as possible carry forward the standards for adequate labeling set forth by the NCRG.

An industry that takes initiative will not be accused of misleading the consumer, will forestall need of federal-state legislation to protect the public, will reward those in the industry who meet quality standards and deny acclaim to the fraudulent. In some of the older trades, such as in the fur industry, apparently it was necessary to turn to government control. In some of the newer industries, such as frozen foods, where the leadership is young, technically trained, and an industry that processes the product into the form that reaches the consumers, leadership for mandatory labeling and standardization of product is possible. Their experience with fish sticks should be a warning to what may befall breaded shrimp, packaged dinners, etc. On the other hand, the experience with another new product, frozen concentrate orange juice, should indicate that increasing that increasing consumer acceptance is possible if the quality of product is standardized and is not allowed to deteriorate through competition in quality characteristics not readily apparent to the consumer and often attracted to the inferior product by the lower price. Then, discouraged with the products, does not become a repeat buyer and both the industry loses sales and the consumer a potentially good product.