



The Great Label Debate

By Jill Gruenwald

There was a time, in the not-too-distant past, when choosing what to eat was simple. It entailed a jaunt to the garden or orchard and harvesting what was in season or venturing to the cellar for canned green beans or peaches. Meats were processed at the local butcher and cured for longevity. Maybe you traded raspberries for apples with a neighbor.

Nowadays, things are more complicated. With foods from numerous climates and cultures at our fingertips, and aisles of ready-made sauces, snacks, and cereals proudly displayed in a kaleidoscope of packaging, Americans' choices are nothing less than staggering. While having all of these options is indeed convenient, it can incite information (and product) overload.

Food labels, both nutritional and on-pack seals or symbols, are intended to inform consumers, enabling us to make conscientious choices. Yet confusion abounds, particularly when consumers don't know what labels mean, assume they mean something they don't, or worse, if the label is misleading, as was the case with Smart Choices™ labeling program, which debuted in August 2009 and was derailed two months later in October.

Smarter Than What?

The much-ridiculed Smart Choices™ labeling program, created by major U.S. food manufacturers, including Kellogg, General Mills, and Kraft, and administered by the American Society for Nutrition and NSF International, was established "...to help people make choices about healthier food and to make different selections than they are making now," according to Mike Hughes, chairman of the program.

At first blush, Hughes' statement seems reasonable, but reading more critically, one could argue that attempting to entice people to "make different selections than they are making now" is a marketing ruse. A truly smart choice doesn't even come close to containing the 12 grams of sugar per serving (at 40 percent of the serving's total calories) allowable by the Smart Choice program.

Herein lies one of Smart Choices' biggest problems, one that sent government officials, industry experts, nutritional counselors and concerned parents reeling. In addition to the approximately 500 products that displayed the bright green front-of-box icon—including nutritionally dubious cheeses, snacks, oils, meals, and entrees—sugar-laden cereals such as Froot Loops, Lucky Charms, and Cocoa Krispies were deemed smart food choices.

"Froot Loops? Froot Loops! I rest my case," stated Marion Nestle, nutrition professor at New York University. "No nutritionist I know would recommend Froot Loops for breakfast. The point of the [Smart Choices] program is to make processed foods look healthy when you really want people eating foods that have been as minimally processed as possible."

The devastating impact of processed convenience foods on our culture has contributed to overwhelming rates of obesity and Type II diabetes. Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, who was a leader in investigating the program's ludicrous claims stated, "At a time when health care efforts rightly focus on prevention of obesity and malnutrition, false and misleading labels may derail, destroy, and delay such laudable national goals. Meaningful nutritional information is welcome, but not faux food facts."

Read Food Labels

Thanks to pressure from the Food and Drug Administration and their fear that consumers would be misled, Smart Choices is now defunct. But we can still ask what we've learned from this shakedown. How do you know when you're being hoodwinked and when you can trust labels on food packaging?

Educate yourself on label reading; it's time well spent. Generally speaking, if there is nutritional content on the front of the package, as with Smart Choices, the manufacturer may be distracting you from the Nutrition Facts Panel on the back or side of the packaging. This is where they're required by law to reveal all nutritional information, not just the self-serving highlights.

According to Michael Pollen, author of *In Defense of Food*, "If you're concerned about your health, you should probably avoid products that make health claims. Why? Because a health claim on a food product is a strong indication it's not really food, and food is what you want to eat."

Look for foods that are high in fiber, vitamins, and minerals, moderate in fat and calories, and low in sugar and sodium. (Trans fats should be avoided always.) Ingredient lists can be a confounding fusion of indecipherable syllables, which should be a red flag, as these are patent indicators of processed foods. They're displayed in descending order, with the most prevalent ingredient listed first. Thus, if the first ingredient is sugar or high fructose corn syrup, beware.

Look for packaged food with no more than five ingredients. Another option is to shop the periphery of the store, where for the most part, you'll find fresh, whole, unprocessed foods. Purchasing products that are local, seasonal, sustainably produced, and minimally processed, eliminates a lot of the guesswork.

The Eco Label

According to a recent Hartman Group study, 40 percent of consumers view certification as important, but many are nevertheless skeptical of seals and what they represent. To be fair, shoppers cannot be to blame for not knowing what each eco seal means, as there has been a recent proliferation of labels claiming the products on which they are found to be good for the environment and for your health.

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) organic certification is most recognizable and gleans much credibility, even if some consumers can't explicitly state what the label means. But there are other, very noteworthy agricultural producer certifications worth exploring, including Certified Humane, Food Alliance and Marine Stewardship Council, to name just a few.

The key to a seal's credibility and legitimacy is if the certifying organization employs third-party inspections. An independent, neutral, third-party entity exhaustively inspects the operation based on predefined criteria and reports back to the certifying organization, allowing no conflict of interest to inform results. Consumers can be assured that the claims are meaningful, verifiable, consistent, clear and transparent.

Granted, certification standards can't be communicated on food packaging, so below are some web resources for investigating eco labels. You just might be surprised at some of the broad-reaching sustainability standards being initiated by some of today's careful stewards of the environment.

Jill Grunewald is a Minneapolis-based certified holistic health counselor, health and wellness writer, and farm hugger. Her practice, Healthful Elements, focuses on bio-individual health, counseling and transformation with whole foods. Jill is also assistant program manager at Food Alliance Midwest. She gleefully stops at one of the Twin Cities' food co-ops at least once a day.

Resources

www.greenerchoices.org

www.ecolabelling.org