



Clarity or Confusion?

by Tracey Bagshaw, MD, Service Innovation Group.

In May last year, The Nutrition Signposting Evaluation concluded that the introduction of a single front of pack, FOP, format to reveal the nutritional content of a product would be the most effective way to eliminate confusion caused by the presence of multiple schemes currently co-existing on the supermarket shelf. Furthermore, evidence provided by the evaluation clearly indicated that the highest rating FOP label in terms of consumer understanding provided a combination of the warnings 'high, medium and low', the Guideline Daily Amounts, GDAs, and traffic light colours, with additional nutrient levels of each product.

These findings come a few years after Government's request that the Food Standards Agency, FSA, produces a FOP labelling system that could be applied nationwide and, in the subsequent months, much effort has been made by the Agency to implement its chosen "Traffic Light" scheme. However, after recent research questioning the effectiveness of the FSA's scheme – which advises shoppers on the healthiness of a product with a colour coded chart – the Agency has surprisingly backed down from forcing the nation's food industry to introduce its much publicised system.

Although the colour scheme has already been adopted by many of Britain's major retailers, the FSA's new ruling has conceded that brands should instead be allowed to combine two of either the traffic light scheme – the words 'high' 'medium' and 'low', or the product's corresponding nutrient percentages.

This unexpected compromise, whilst disappointing some industry experts, represents a victory to many manufacturers who feared that the enforcement of the FSA's system would prompt a significant drop in sales. According to the consumer group Which?, which backs the traffic light system, the recent climb-down is not only unnecessary but flies straight in the face of public opinion. "People want to have a single labelling scheme," contends Sue Davies, Chief Policy Advisor at Which?, "[and] we think this compromise is really going to let consumers down."

Despite an age where, due not only to the recent economic recession but also to the sheer pace of life, consumer demand has been focused on convenience – the immediate availability of food at a relatively low cost – awareness of the importance of FOP is high. Of 17,000 parents surveyed by the website 'Netmums', for example, 80% understood the value of having

a transparent system in place. But, in a world where we often find a different supermarket chain on every corner (not to mention the introduction of 'Express', 'Local' and 'Metro' outlets), the majority of people simply do not have the time, nor indeed the inclination, to work out from where they are shopping, which specific guidelines apply.

The convenience of a unified system and the clarity of the traffic light scheme is undeniable. What's more, with evidence suggesting that consumers read on average no more than seven words, the FSAs system does seem to be the obvious solution. However, if shoppers are seriously concerned about the nutritional value of their baskets then they probably will be prepared to pay more precise attention to the information provided and thus be unfazed by differing FOP systems.

Additionally, although traffic lighting does have evident advantages, it does not completely outweigh the benefits of GDAs. Highlighting that under traffic light labelling, 75% of breakfast cereals carry a red warning, Jane Holdsworth of the Food and Drink Federation asserts, "The GDA system...is based on fact and does not demonise food" – an explanation perhaps for why Kelloggs may prefer having the monochrome GDA display on its Cornflakes.

Proponents of the traffic light scheme urge however that when it comes down to buying the 'basics', such as Cornflakes or Heinz Baked Beans, the majority would not be swayed from their usual products. Instead, it is to the more fleeting, impulsive or overly indulgent purchases of chocolate bars, crisps, ready meals and sandwiches that the colour codes are most applicable.

The new ruling is, the FSA has stressed, only an interim measure while a European Union, Continent-wide labelling scheme is impending. However, the co-ordination of the current 'free for all' may come a little too late. The Shadow Health Secretary, Andrew Lansley, recently left no ambiguity in labelling the FSA as "a conflicting voice in Government" and revealed plans under a Conservative administration to focus on a better understanding of the nation's diet by bringing nutritional strategy in-house.

As the industry continues to strongly advocate the less transparent GDA system however, it leaves us questioning whether it similarly prioritises consumer interest, or simply fears being given the red light.

www.sigeurope.co.uk