

Does labeling of food products positively or negatively affect buyer motives?

Labeling of food products affects both positively and negatively on the buyers motives as it involves buyer perceptions and trust towards labeling. Ethical food labeling is what consumers look for while making purchases. Labeling of food products offers information which is useful for finding the right products according to the needs and requirements. Though it has some positive sides but various surveys and research confirms that consumers are often overwhelmed and confused when it comes to ethical food products. The more confusion is due to the vast array of different environmental labels which are being used by the companies and consumers are not aware of the labels. It is evident that consumers will prefer more environmental friendly products if they are more clearer about the labels and facts related. Labels help consumers in providing information related to their food and from where it has come- whether grown organically or not, allergen details etc. It is important that the labels should be there on the food products as they help in providing information but it is also important that there should be awareness regarding labels and how to understand the information provided on labels of various food products. Often food labels are perceived by consumers and are confused not being ethically good due to less awareness and knowledge. Food label is one of the important source of information sharing regarding the food items which is used by the customers while deciding and buying uncertain food products. (Wandel, 1997:212; Dimara & Skuras, 2005:90, Silayoi & Speece, 2004:624). The nutritional value and the ingredients of the food are known with help of labels (Wandel, 1997:213; Higginson *et al.*, 2002:95). For those who avoid certain ingredients due to religion and ethics (Davies, 2000:2), or allergy or health reasons (Abbott, 2004:S345; Voordouw *et al.*, 2009:94) accurate and reliable food labeling is of great importance to them. These days health conscious buyers are also highly reliant on the labeling of the food products as they are more aligned towards making healthy food choices. As health, religion and allergies are major reason for consumers to study and use information labels (Wandel, 1997:212), it is important for the companies to provide complete, clear, exact and honest food nutrition information on the labels of the food products (Davies, 2000:3) which will help consumers in better buying decisions.

There are many buyer reasons and preferences which are helping them in identifying right product through labeling but there is an important concern still going on which is effecting the buyers perspective which is "Food Ethics". The write-up helps in studying the moral acceptability of the labels on the food products from the consumers perspective and how they feel it to be more ethical. There are various ethical issues which are important to food labeling and ethics according to consumers. Food ethics helps in deciding the behavior of various entities, such as retailers, producers and manufacturers, and regulators of the food industry. Food ethics is important to consumers as food affects their body (Physically as well as mentally) and their cultural and social environment in which they live (Mephram, 2000:610). It is linked to the trust consumers has on manufacturer and retailers. It is essential these days to recognize the need of creating trust and knowledge in the minds of consumers related to the food products offered by the company for increasing sales and profits rather than focusing only on the marketing and brand awareness. According to the perspectives of the consumers, the ethical issues which are important and considerable to food labeling and ethics are reliability and honesty on the food labels, clearness or transparency of label information, food additive catalog on labels and labeling of genetically modified (GM) foods. Trust is most important factor which affects the consumers buying decisions. It is linked to perceptions which consumers possess for accuracy, knowledge and their anxiety towards public welfare. (Frewer *et al.*, 1996:483; Uusitalo & Oksanen, 2004:214, 215). Consumers look forward to companies that being a part of their corporate social responsibility, companies will follow ethical norms and all the related laws for ethical food products. (Mohr *et al.*, 2001:47). This trust will be enhanced if companies offer a clear source of accurate information through food labeling. Food labels are expected to disclose all the facts and details about the products they are going to consume and facilitate informed decisions. (Croft, 2004:40). Food labels are considered very important these days and every consumer is aware and conscious while purchasing food.

By working on providing these ethical and quality assured food products which are labeled and not much confusing will help in attracting consumers. It is important for companies to show more visibly about their following ethical initiatives and responsibilities in labeling by, for example, using food labels to differentiate themselves from others in ethical look upon (Uusitalo & Oksanen, 2004:220). There are

certain ways in which food industries could improve their food labeling in link with ethical perspective of consumers. This can be done through

- Risk communication- Often consumers experience doubt and uncertainty when they are unaware about the consequences and predict it which is called their perceived risk. (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2009:188). This risk of unexpected result regarding any product lead to search for information by the consumers as their strategy and sometimes force them not to purchase the product. In order to reduce the risk factor, food labeling information can play a vital role in decision making by consumers regarding their preferences about food. Research regarding food allergens concerns by consumers is one of the great example of risk communication improvements which facilitated Food Standards Australia New Zealand to improve their labeling legislation (Abbott, 2004). It made mandatory to label allergy- or intolerance-causing foods or substances present in any amount. This makes labeling more ethical and consumers these days prefer more ethical products.
- Comprehensible information provision- It is the responsibility of food industry and regulators to eliminate the risk communication through labeling which provides comprehensible and clear information. It is often seen difficult to understand the labeling. The terminology used is technical and makes it difficult to understand and prevent consumers from making well-versed buying decisions. For example , the association of sodium with salt, which is difficult for consumers to understand (Cowburn & Stockley, 2005:23). The revised regulations works on using more common words like salt instead of *sodium chloride* (SA, 2007:91), which might help and assist consumers in ingredient understanding. This can also be done by providing clear interpretation of information on nutrition labels or using standard values against which to evaluate numbers appearing on the label.(Davies, 2000:4; Cowburn & Stockley, 2005:26). Consumer education on food labeling as well as use of clear and simple format of labeling used by regulators are both equally important.
- Consumer education on food labeling- Consumer who are well aware about the labeling patterns and methods are more willing to buy a product as compared to ones who are less educated in understanding the labeling. Less informed consumers prefer food labeling information to be precise, simple and clear. (McCullough & Best, 1980:191). More aware consumers are often less misguided and have fewer misconceptions regarding food products (Mazis & Raymond, 1997:23).Consumers requires help at times need to differentiate between accurate and misleading information to make buying decisions (Abbott, 1997:43). Consumer education programs are needed in order to make consumers aware about the information on food labeling and help them in making correct decisions while purchasing food products. In Today's Scenario, educated and health conscious consumers are more aware about the food labeling and most of their purchases are based on the nutritional and calories labeling provided on the food products.

Along with all these ways, off course the brand and marketing methods play an important role in effecting buyers behavior towards a product. Complication occurs when different companies offer same product with different labels and adds confusion and distress among consumers. Food labels are considered to be important nowadays as consumers are conscious about their health and other issues they make preferred choices while reading the food labels. Mandatory and standard labels will provide consumers with the certainty of protection and will help them in choosing particular products on premium prices as well. Along with clear and precise food labeling, educating consumers will help them well in selecting particular product according to their need. Educating consumers will help in improving sales by creating more awareness about brand as well as products offered by the companies. Labeling of food products can lead to positivity among buyer as it will assist consumers in better purchasing decisions but also it is essential for consumers to be aware and well-educated about the meaning and terms mentioned in labels. It is always better to use easy and simple labels which help consumers in better comparing and planning their purchase. In today's marketplace with increasing attractiveness towards green products,

expected consumers spending is getting doubled on "Green Products" reaching \$500 billion in 2009 (CBS News, 2008), and they are willing to pay the same amount as well (Veisten, 2007; Vlosky et al., 1999; Wu"stenhagen, 1998). Only thing they prefer is the ethical food labeling which help them in selecting their choice of premium products.

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