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LABELLING OF FOOD PRODUCTS AS A DETERMINANT OF SHOPPING DECISIONS

Proper labelling is an important source of information for the consumer and it is also the fulfilment of an obligation imposed on manufacturers, distributors and importers. Poland's accession to the European Union boosted the importance of legibility of information and correct labelling in compliance with the valid regulations. The objective of this study was to examine the awareness of a contemporary consumer with respect to labelling food product packaging and the effect of encoding on product purchase. A questionnaire survey was conducted with 130 respondents (male and female). It found that a considerable portion of Polish consumers pay attention to how food product packages are labelled, particularly for dairy products, meat products and beverages. Consumers regarded the absence of information in Polish and placing illegible signs on labels as the most important packaging defects.

Key words: consumer behaviour, product labelling, packages

INTRODUCTION

Packaging plays a vital role in distinguishing a product from those of the competition. In a self-service store, it plays the same role as a seller and it is also very important in direct sales. Consumer expectations regarding packages increase with growing competition and consumer expectations. Buyers expect packages:

- to protect the product,
- to identify and distinguish the product on the market,
- to make it easy to use the product,
- to provide basic information about the purchased goods.

All of these factors are very important, for example, a package protects the goods, it reduces the purchase-associated risk and shortens the time needed for its preparation (finished product, semi-finished product, raw material). It changes the mode of consumption and reduces the purchase frequency. The main role of a package is to extend the product usability and, in consequence, to reduce the risk of product expiry and consumer loss. Furthermore, a consumer expects a package to facilitate the product use, which is mostly affected by the package size. There are packages on the market which are prepared to satisfy the needs of a consumer; there are even single food portions. This applies mainly to food products [5].

Packaging also performs a protective function. It secures the utility value of a product by preventing its destruction or damage. The promotion and sales function consists in promoting the product inside the package. Furthermore, a package enables storage, use and handling – together called the physical organisation of work. The informational, educational and ecological function of a package consists in identifying a package and distinguishing it from competitive products [4].

Although a package does not occur “on its own”, it provides the strongest stimulus which evokes a desire to buy the product. The potential usability and quality of the product is not as important to a consumer as its package. Market analysts claim that packaging should be embedded in the product marketing-mix strategy, which is a whole range of actions related to the product concept, pricing policy, distribution policy and promotion [7].

A study conducted by the National Family Opinion for the “Sales Management” periodical in the USA indicated that 60% of respondent females are willing to pay more for a package that is easy-to-store, open, close and re-use [1].

Today's consumers are increasingly aware of their choices. In order to meet the expectations of consumers, the European Federation of Food Industry in cooperation with the biggest food companies in Europe introduced a system of food labelling, which is mainly aimed at the prevention of lifestyle diseases resulting from poor dietary habits. This system serves as an educational program so that the consumer is informed about the nutritional value of the entire product and/or its portion, and already the place of purchase can, without having advanced knowledge about nutrition, determine the validity of the product in their diet [3].

As regards the informational function of a package, consumers want it to make identification and distinguishing of goods easy. In this manner, the buyer, driven by their individual needs, has a greater choice of products. Moreover, the information function helps salesmen and distributors to dispose of the goods more effectively. A package mainly informs about:

- the type of product and its manufacturer,
- the product stability,
- the method of product use, including the method of its preparation and storage,
- the price,
- quality awards,
- particular precautions,
- the environment-friendly quality of the product or its package [6].

Consumers' increasing awareness regarding environmental protection has forced manufacturers to make environment-friendly packages. Consumers often choose packages made of natural materials. Moreover, new environmental requirements favour new solutions in environment-friendly packages. Some consumers have started to reject the packaging of some products, in accordance with the “three V principle” – Vermieden, Vermindern, Verwerten (avoid, restrict, use) [2].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The questionnaire survey was conducted between February and September, 2014 with 130 respondents, both male and female, in three age groups: 18–29 years old, 30–50 years old and above 50 years old.

The questionnaire consisted of a data box and 7 questions. To get more specific replies, the questionnaire contained a multiple answer question and a partly open-ended one. The other questions were close-ended single-answer questions.

RESULTS

The everyday life of contemporary consumers requires them to make decisions all the time. As a rule, such decisions do not necessitate reflection on why they are taken, what the reason behind a decision is and what affects it. A decision regarding a purchase is not taken instantaneously. It is rather a process – a long- or short-time – which takes into account the limitations of the person making the decision, caused by natural predispositions, personality traits (memory, temperament) and other personal characteristics (qualifications, experience, education, sex).

The aim of the first question was to examine the respondents' interest in the labelling of food products when making a purchase. Detailed results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Respondents' interest in the labelling of food products

	% of total replies	% of replies according to the variability factor				
		Sex		Age		
		Females	Males	18–25	26–50	>50
Yes	19	14.06	24.24	3.77	28.57	31.43
More yes than no	58	56.25	59.09	58.49	57.14	57.14
No	6	9.38	3.03	13.21	2.38	0
More no than yes	17	20.31	13.64	24.53	11.9	11.43

Source: Author's questionnaire

An analysis of the results has shown that the respondents pay attention (yes 19%, more yes than no 58%) to product labelling. It was shown in the questionnaire that a considerable portion of the respondents (no 6%, more no than yes 17%) did not find labelling important.

An analysis of the results with respect to the respondents' sex showed that men find label information important more frequently than women (M – 24.24%, F – 14,06%). Nearly 10% of the females did not pay any attention to the information provided on packages.

Respondents aged 18–25 read label information less frequently than others (3.77%). Nearly 14% pay no attention to information provided on the packaging by the manufacturer, which did not occur among the respondents aged 50 years or more. This can be caused by consumer experience and better nutrition awareness in elderly people.

In terms of commodity science, packaging performs three functions: technical, aesthetic and economic. In the technical function, packaging facilitates product distribution, its consumption and protection. The economic function is the ratio of the packaging production cost to the product manufacturing cost. The last function is the aesthetic function of packaging, which is responsible for the packaging's general appearance. An analysis of the overall results has shown that nearly half of the respondents (45.38%) regard packaging as performing all of its basic functions. The information function of packaging was classified as second by the respondents (30%) and the aesthetic function was the last (10%).

An analysis of the results with respect to the respondents' sex indicated that a significant group of women (32.81%) and men (21.27%) think that the labelling of food products provides important information to the consumer. The smallest percentage of male (13.64%) and female (6.25%) respondents think that a package makes the product look more attractive.

An analysis of the study results with respect to the respondents' age has shown that all the age groups regard labelling food products as an important part of the information about the product (18–25 – 28.30%; 26–50 – 35.71%; >50 – 25.71%). The group of respondents aged 18–25 was the smallest (7.55%) to perceive product labelling as enriching the packaging appearance. This same reply appeared nearly twice as frequently in the group of respondents aged 59+ (14.29%).

A contemporary consumer increasingly often looks at a food product label for information about the composition of the food product, its expiry date and for information about the manufacturer. All of this data must be arranged in a well-thought-out and aesthetically pleasing manner so that it does not put off a potential buyer, while at the same time being truthful. The aim of another question in the questionnaire was to find out what kind of information on the label draws the respondents' attention. An analysis of the overall results indicates that the respondents were most interested in the product composition and its calorific value (56.92%). This was followed by the package capacity (32.31%).

In terms of age, it was found that manufacturer data is much more important to the age group of 50+ (14.29%) than to the respondents aged 18–25 years (1.89%). Respondents aged 18–25 years did not pay any attention to information regarding the content of products that may cause allergies. The respondents in the groups aged 26–50 years (4.76%) and more than 50 years (8.57%) paid little attention to this data.

When buying food products, consumers must pay attention mainly to information provided on the labels or information displayed next to the products. The next question in the questionnaire was intended to establish the purpose for which the respondents read food product labels. In other words, to find the

information they look for on the label. In their replies, respondents usually (43.85%) mentioned the product expiry date, followed (30%) by nutritional value and product composition. An analysis of the results with respect to the sex indicated that the female respondents were more interested in the product expiry date shown on the packaging (56.25%) than the male respondents (31.82%). According to the respondents, this was followed by the nutritional value and the product composition (F – 32.81%; M – 27.27%). Package capacity proved to be the least important to the female respondents (1.56%), whereas it was mentioned by 15.15% of men.

Food products in their category are labelled in a special manner. There are a large number of types of labelling on the market, such as organic products, agricultural produce, GMO products. The general analysis has shown that “an organic product” is the best-recognised type of product (41.92%). This is followed by “a genetically modified product” (26.22%) and an agricultural product (20.55%) and “a product subjected to ionising radiation” was the least recognised (11.32%).

This may be caused by the fact that they are promoted with different intensity. Organic products are widely available and there are many more of them, which may have made the respondents choose them more often. Products labelled as “genetically modified” are increasingly more visible because they have been heavily promoted recently. Additionally, this may have been caused by ever-present anti-GMO campaigns. The low awareness of consumers of products subjected to ionising radiation resulted in its low ranking.

The group of products referred to as food products is very large. It includes meat products, fish, frozen products, vegetables, beverages and many more. This group is relatively diverse with respect to its properties and stability. The respondents were asked to choose 4 groups of products for which they usually read the label information. An analysis has shown that dairy products were mentioned the most frequently (95.38%), followed by meat products (83.08%), beverages (46.15%), while sugar and flour were mentioned the least frequently (1.54%). The respondents in all the age groups pay the least attention to the labelling of loose products.

The requirements laid down in standards and regulations for packages do not always meet a consumer’s expectations. For example, the drawbacks of labelling of food products include too much or too little information, no information on the labels in Polish and insufficient legibility of signs. An analysis of the study results has shown that the respondents see the absence of a label in the Polish language as the most important drawback (38.46%), followed by illegible signs (32.31%), insufficient amount of information (15.38%) and too much information (13.85%). An analysis of the study with respect to the respondents’ sex indicated that illegible signs were the most important drawback for women (35.94%), and the absence of information in Polish was the most important for men (46.97%). Such replies given by the women were caused by the fact that they appreciate the aesthetic value of packaging more often and large legible signs with a clear message are important to them.

Summarising the study results in this regard has shown that illegible signs are regarded as the greatest drawback in the group aged 18–25 years (39.62%), whereas the absence of information in Polish is regarded as the most important drawback in the group aged 26–50 years (47.62%) and in the group aged 50 or more (57.14%). This may be caused by the discomfort that consumers feel when they buy products with a label bearing information they do not understand.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Over three-quarters (77%) of the respondents read food product labels.
2. 45% of the respondents identified the three main functions performed by the packaging: information, marketing and aesthetic. The latter is the most important for males and to respondents aged 50 or more.
3. Only 3.85% of the respondents read the information on the label for the content of any allergens.
4. The product composition and its calorific value is the most important information mentioned on a product package.
5. Checking the product expiry date is the main reason for which respondents analyse the information provided on product packaging.
6. Three times more men than women check information on the label regarding the method of the product preparation and its application.
7. Only 6% of the respondents aged 50+ and 40% of the respondents in the group aged 18–25 years look for information on the label regarding the product nutritional value and its composition.
8. The group of products whose labels were the most frequently read by the respondents includes: dairy products, meat products, vegetables, beverages and sweets. They pay the least attention to information on the packaging of loose products (flour, sugar, salt).

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