



WHITEHOUSE CONSULTANCY UPDATE

By Viviana Spaghetti, Political Consultant

Is keeping consumers informed a cost for businesses?

According to the Government, more than half of UK consumers actively look for the word 'healthy' when shopping for food. You would assume that could only be good news, both in terms of what are current consumer habits and as an indication of some success for government efforts to shift consumer preferences from high fat, salt and sugary foods to healthier options.

You would also assume this is very promising for manufacturers and distributors of health foods, and for food businesses that are already reformulating products to cut calories in line with public health objectives. But for this shift in consumer behaviour to have a meaningful effect on public health, you have to ask how much consumers actually know about what constitutes a 'healthy' snack, a nutritious meal or indeed a balanced diet.

In actuality, and partly due to the often contradictory and sometimes confusing advice around carbs, fats, calories, what we should eat (and how much of it), consumers often find themselves more and more confused about the steps they can take to ensure that their good intentions are supported by informed choices that result in healthier foods on their plates.

So, what is the role of food businesses in pointing consumers in the right direction and does it come at a cost?

Food labelling is there to help consumers make informed choices about what they put in their stomachs and has long been recognised as playing a central role in promoting a healthier diet and in tackling worrying obesity levels. The vast majority of provisions on what food business operators can (and must) say about their products are harmonised at the EU level and emanate from Brussels. However, voluntary labelling initiatives

geared towards providing consumers with more information have proliferated at national level across the EU and have been promoted by food businesses themselves.

In the UK, the Department of Health has introduced a traffic light scheme that combines red, amber and green colour-coding, nutritional information and percentage reference intakes. Following suit, industry giants including Coca-Cola, Mondelez, Nestlé, PepsiCo and Unilever have recently proposed an Evolved Nutrition Label, integrating portion sizes in the existing colour-coded schemes.

These schemes, all seemingly noble in purpose, have the potential to undermine or even reduce the understanding of consumers, now confronted with several different labels for similar foods. They also create significant barriers to trade for food businesses who trade to other European countries.

While the traffic light scheme is only

voluntary (though widely employed), some have already called for it to become a legal requirement for all products once the UK has left the EU. Making it mandatory could have an even greater impact on small businesses that may struggle to bear the costs of re-labelling as well as ensuring compliance with requirements. Similar discussions are also taking place at the EU level, where the European Commission has recently launched an EU wide debate on front of pack labelling.

In the context of the current public health debate, shifts in consumer demands and Britain's departure from the EU, these are important discussions for businesses to follow.

If you have any questions on what political and regulatory changes may impact your business, do get in touch by visiting www.whitehouseconsulting.co.uk

Whitehouse is the leading specialist in public affairs and communications for the health, food and nutrition sectors, with a particular focus on medical technology and innovation, commissioning and procurement, social care funding, patient choice and access to services, nutrition and obesity, and private sector involvement in the NHS.

