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Canadians' Understanding and Acceptance of Composition and Production Claims

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ce sommaire est également disponible en français

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Background and Methodology

The Government of Canada has guidelines to assist industry, consumers and government in applying, understanding and evaluating composition-based claims that highlight ingredients and flavours on food labels. Guidelines also exist respecting the use of the term “natural” on food labels. These guidelines are being revised to provide more clarity in order to promote truthful and not misleading labelling and advertisements. However, in some cases, ingredient names are applied to describe other characteristics of a food, such as texture, form or colour or even a style of recipe. Exploration is required to understand what consumers would consider misleading when ingredient names are used to describe other characteristics of foods and are not ingredients or flavours in the food (such as butter tarts).

Consequently, the Government of Canada commissioned EKOS Research Associates to conduct a survey of Canadians about their understanding and acceptance of labelling practices. Our approach in conducting this study involved an online survey of 1,710 Canadians regarding their views on the issues outlined above.

The total cost of this research was \$16,525.00 (excluding HST) and \$18,673.25 (including HST).

Survey Findings

Views on Food Product Labelling

Results suggest a highly attentive consumer base, with eight in ten indicating they take into consideration the nutrition facts table (82 per cent), the ingredient list (80 per cent), and information on the front panel (80 per cent) when purchasing a food product. Fewer, but still a clear majority (72 per cent), say they pay attention to the common name of the product.

Respondents were provided with background information regarding foods that no longer contain the ingredients for which they were originally named (e.g., butter tarts), and then asked whether they believe that these products should be required to include clarifying information on the product's labels to inform consumers that the ingredient is not present in the food. Results reveal fairly strong support for clarifying labels, with two-thirds of respondents (65 per cent) saying they would support such a requirement.

When asked, unprompted, to explain their answer, those who indicated support for clarifying information offered a wide range of answers. One in seven feel that not providing clarification would constitute falsified representation (16 per cent), believe in the need for precise labelling (13 per cent), or believe that consumers should have complete knowledge of what they are eating (13 per cent). Among those who feel that it is not necessary to provide clarifying food label information, a belief that the onus is on the consumer to educate themselves (11 per cent), that the requirement is simply unnecessary (10 per cent), or that it is “common sense” that a product’s name is not necessarily a description of the product’s ingredients (6 per cent) were mentioned most often.

Canadians were also asked whether they believe that it is acceptable for the name of a food product to emphasize certain ingredients as a flavour designation even when the product itself does not contain those ingredients (e.g., honey dipped donuts). Six in ten (60 per cent) feel that such a naming scheme would be misleading, while four in ten (38 per cent) see no problem with these types of product names. Those who believe that it would be misleading for a product to carry the name of an ingredient that it does not contain were asked whether they believe that the labels on these products should provide an indication that ingredient is, in fact, a flavour. Responses were virtually unanimous, with 97 per cent declaring their support for such a requirement.

Respondents were also given the example of a food product that is named for the ingredient with which it is meant to be consumed, but does not contain the ingredient itself (e.g., beer nuts). Respondents were then asked whether they believe that such products should include clarifying information on their label to inform consumers that the named ingredient is not present in the food. Canadians are more divided on this issue, with the slight majority (55 per cent) feeling that such labelling requirements are unnecessary.

Canadians were given a list of food products which contain ingredient names, and asked whether they would expect the use of the ingredient name to describe the content of the food or the “style” of the food. Results vary considerably depending on the food product. Two-thirds (67 per cent) say they would expect cream puffs to contain cream, while 61 per cent would expect butter tarts to contain butter. A plurality (45 per cent) believe that fish tea soup should contain fish (although 27 per cent of respondents did not provide a response, suggesting a lack of familiarity with this product). For all the other food products examined, the plurality or majority indicate that they expect the ingredient name to describe the style of the food, rather than be present in the food product. Only four in ten would anticipate finding beer in beer salami (41 per cent) or meat in mincemeat pies (39 per cent). Three in ten (30 per cent) would expect fish tea soup to contain tea (and a large proportion (30 per cent) provided no response). Just over one in four expect wine gums to contain wine (29 per cent), or sweetbreads to contain bread (27 per cent). And, at the bottom of the list, only one in five believe that peameal bacon should contain peas (23 per cent), or that hamburgers should contain ham (17 per cent).

Canadians were also asked about modifying food product names to avoid the use of ingredient names that are not included in the product – e.g., “Chocolatey Cookies” to describe cookies with artificial chocolate flavour. Respondents are divided on this issue, with half (50 per cent) stating that the name is not clear, and a similar percentage (47 per cent) who feel there is sufficient clarifying information.

Awareness and Views on Peameal Bacon

Canadians were then asked a series of questions specifically about peameal bacon. They were first asked if they had heard of “peameal” bacon. Half (52 per cent) indicate they have indeed heard of this product, while a sizeable minority (46 per cent) have not.

Those respondents who had heard of peameal bacon were asked, unprompted, to describe how peameal bacon differs from other forms of bacon. The majority (61 per cent) say that peameal bacon is rolled or cured in either cornmeal or ground peas, while one in five believe the difference lies in the cut of the meat (21 per cent), or in the lower fat content (17 per cent).

All respondents were informed that while historically peameal bacon was prepared with ground dried peas or “pea meal”, modern preparation methods do not involve the use of peas. They were then asked whether they believe it is acceptable for producers to continue to use a name like peameal bacon, even if it no longer accurately describes the product. Respondents seem to favour the use of the traditional name, with six in ten (59 per cent) saying its use is acceptable. One-third of respondents (36 per cent) disagree with its continued use, and five per cent offered no response.

Perceptions of Natural and Organic Foods

The survey then asked a number of questions examining Canadians’ views on “natural” and “organic” foods. Half of respondents were asked questions about “natural” foods, and the other half were asked about “organic” foods.

When asked, unprompted, to explain their understanding of the term “natural”, respondents provided a number of interpretations, with the plurality (30 per cent) suggesting that a “natural” product is derived from natural ingredients. One in five (20 per cent) feel that natural products are not processed or modified in any way, and one in seven believe that “natural” implies no preservatives (16 per cent), no pesticides or herbicides (14 per cent), or no artificial flavours or colours (13 per cent).

These respondents were also asked, unprompted, to list their reasons for purchasing natural foods. The most common reasons identified for purchasing these products are: they contain no artificial flavours or colours (69 per cent), they contain no food additives or preservatives (69 per cent), or they contain exclusively natural ingredients (62 per cent).

Results further suggest that Canadians are generally doubtful that the word “natural” carries any legal meaning, with 65 per cent saying that they do not believe that natural means the food has been certified by the Government of Canada as meeting certain standards (just one in five believe “natural” foods are certified).

The remaining half of respondents were asked, unprompted, to give their interpretation of the term “organic”. In contrast to the word “natural”, respondents are largely in agreement in their interpretation of the word “organic”. Six in ten (62 per cent), believe that an organic product is one that contains no pesticides or herbicides.

These respondents were also asked, unprompted, to list their reasons for purchasing organic foods. A clear majority (72 per cent) list the absence of pesticides and herbicides as their main reason for purchasing these food products. Six in ten point to the lack of food additives or preservatives (59 per cent) and the exclusive use of natural ingredients (57 per cent).

Respondents who had been asked about “organic” foods were also asked whether they believe that organic foods are certified by the Government of Canada. As with natural foods, more than half (55 per cent) do not believe that “organic” foods are verified as meeting certain standards, although a sizeable minority (31 per cent) believe that they are.

Canadians were asked whether they believe that the use of the term “natural” can differ across foods or if the term should be applied consistently across all food products. Results reveal that Canadians are divided on this issue, although there is a lean to allowing some flexibility in the application of the term “natural”: 50 per cent say it should be permissible for labels to vary across foods, while 43 per cent feel the requirements should be consistent across all food products.

Results further reveal that a clear majority of Canadians (76 per cent) do not believe that a genetically engineered product should be labelled as natural, while just one in seven (14 per cent) are open to the idea.

Finally, respondents were asked if they believe that natural ingredients can be considered natural if they are used perform an additive function. While half of respondents (50 per cent) believe that a product should lose its status as a natural product when used as an additive, almost four in ten (37 per cent) believe that a natural ingredient remains natural, regardless of its use.