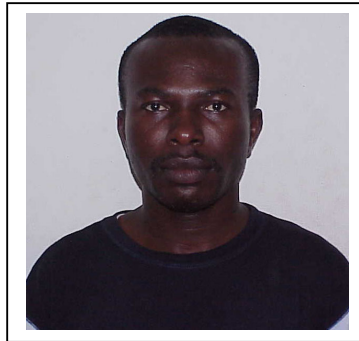


## STUDENT CONTRIBUTION

### Food labeling: Are we doing it right with the right information?



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In marketing a food product, beauty, aesthetics and personality are ingredients that are needed to be noticed, and are therefore vigorously projected on the package or embodied within it. Along with this is the inscription that communicates the identity of the product. This identification or inscription - in the form of a tag, brand, mark, pictorial or other descriptive matter, written, printed, stenciled, marked, embossed or impressed on, or attached to a container of food - is what is referred to as the label. This label must communicate precisely the identity of the food product, which sometimes can be difficult for many manufacturers, distributors and importers, thereby becoming misleading, insufficient, or totally giving wrong information to the consumer. Consumers on the other hand stand to gain if particular attention is paid to the label. It is, therefore, important for food manufacturers, distributors, importers, exporters, and particularly consumers, to be abreast with current laws and regulations on food labeling in order to avoid legal action and discomfort to consumers.

Labeling consists of any written, printed or graphic matter that is present on the label, accompanies the food, or is exhibited near the food, for the purpose of promoting its sale or disposal. For conventional food labeling, certain items must be made known. These include the product identity statement, the net quantity of contents, the identity of the manufacturer, packer or distributor, the ingredient list and the "nutrition facts panel." In addition, country of origin of the food should be declared since its omission

would mislead or deceive the consumer. In case food undergoes processing in a second country (which changes its nature), the country in which the processing is performed should be considered to be the country of origin for the purpose of labeling. The product identity statement and the net quantity of contents (metric units) are displayed on the principal display panel (PDP). The PDP is the portion of the package predominantly seen by consumers. The ingredient list, the manufacturer or distributor, and nutrition labeling is placed on the information panel (located immediately to the right of the PDP). The product identity statement includes the name of the product - which must indicate the true nature of food and ought to be specific and not general - and possibly along with its coined, fanciful, brand name or trade mark. It also includes additional words or phrases as required to avoid misleading or confusing the consumer in regard to the true nature and physical condition of the food, including but not limited to, the type of packing medium, style, and the condition or type of treatment it has undergone for instance, spray dried, extruded, reconstituted or smoked.

Ingredients are listed by their common or usual name, and listed in descending order by their predominance by weight. The signature line bears the name of the manufacturer, packer or distributor - to provide consumers with contact information should they have any questions or comments. Under the label's nutrition facts panel, food manufacturers may be required to include the following nutrients, which should appear in the order: total calories, calories from fat, total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, total carbohydrate, dietary fiber, sugars, protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium and iron.

Apart from the principal display panel and nutritional facts panel, the date marking and storage instructions must also be properly displayed. Since it communicates the date on which the food became the product described and also signifies the end of the period under any storage conditions, during which the product will remain fully marketable. In addition, it is important to retain specific qualities for which tacit or express claim have been made. Depending on the date type, for example, either *best before* or *expiry date*, consumers must understand what it means. Best before, also known as Date of Minimum Durability suggests that beyond the stated date, the food product may be perfectly satisfactory, whereas for expiring date, the food should not be regarded as marketable. Moreover, instruction for use, including reconstitution, where necessary, should be included on the label to ensure correct utilization of the food.

For irradiated foods, that is, food that has been treated with ionizing radiation, there should be a written statement showing that treatment in close proximity to the name of the food. The use of the international food irradiation symbol is not compulsory, but when it is applied, it should be in close proximity to the name of the food. Should an irradiated product be used as an ingredient in another food, it should be declared as such in the list of ingredients. In addition, when a single ingredient is prepared from a raw material which has been irradiated, the label of the product should contain a statement indicating the treatment.

Also, for food and food ingredients that contain additives or flavourings which contain, or are produced from genetically modified organisms (GMOs), they must be clearly labeled as “Produced from Genetically Modified....” preceding the specific ingredient, and for single ingredient foods, “Genetically Modified ...” followed by the ingredient. However, this may be optional for some countries.

All in all, the language used on the label must be understood by the consumers. For example, food with only Arabic instructions on a food label will not be accepted on the Ghanaian market. Such food products must either be re-labeled in English, or will face outright rejection by the responsible regulatory body.

A food product is misbranded if the label is false or misleading. A product is misbranded if it is offered for sale under the name of another food, if it is an imitation of another food and the label does not say ‘imitation’, and if the package and the label do not have the required elements discussed above.

It is important to note that foods exempted from labeling are those served for immediate consumption, medical foods (for people under the care of a physician), ready to eat foods (eg pastries), foods shipped in bulk (as long as it is not for sale to consumers), plain coffee, tea, and some spices.

In conclusion, food products are not only labeled to meet the standards, but also to communicate to the consumer the nutritional and health benefits that could be derived from purchasing such a food product. Therefore, it is important that consumers look out for all these facts on food labels before making their purchase.