
FLABEL Research activities & main results in months 1-18 (Aug 2008 - Jan 2010)

The FLABEL mid-term Scientific Review took place on April 29th, 2010, with two independent scientific reviewers present, as well as the European Commission Project Scientific Officer, and the Work Package leaders. The overall assessment of the reviewers is that good progress has been made, with most objectives and technical goals achieved. It was felt that the deliverables achieved to date make a novel contribution to the overall field of study.

Work Package 1 - Label incidence, penetration and typology

To begin, the consortium created a benchmark of consumer exposure to nutrition labels in different countries, identifying the major types of labels used, as well as the major differences between the different systems. This involved recording the information on more than 37,000 products in 5 product categories (breakfast cereals, carbonated soft drinks, biscuits, yoghurts, pre-packed fresh ready meals) in 84 retail stores (50 different retailers) across the EU 27 plus Turkey. There is 85% penetration of nutrition labelling in these product categories across Europe. A webinar giving the full results of the audit is available at <http://www.focusbiz.co.uk/webinars/flabel/wp1/>.

Interested to determine if there were any external factors that would likely influence consumers' understanding and use of nutrition labels, an assessment was made of Public Health Awareness Campaigns around nutrition information on food labels in the EU 27. Out of 125 campaigns identified, 42 met the criteria for inclusion in the study and have been evaluated. The researchers noted a geographical difference and it was found that the highest campaign density was in Northern Europe. Salt was the most common nutrient addressed in such campaigns, and there was a relationship between the prevalence of campaigns and the prevalence of nutrition labelling in a country. Most campaigns were government-initiated and addressed the general public, often using more than one media channel.

A four-country label typology study that used the multiple sorting technique provided significant direction for all future studies. Researchers found that even when confronted with 22 different types of labels, consumers use two constructs to categorise nutrition labels; 1) the extent to which the label directly shows that the product has a high level of healthiness, and 2) how much information is being provided in the label. Following these results, the consortium agreed that for the purpose of future studies, nutrition labels would be divided into 3 groups; 1) Directive (e.g. health logos), 2) Semi-directive (e.g. traffic light and hybrid labels) and 3) Non-directive (e.g. GDA systems and nutrition tables). WPI has been completed.

Work Package 2 – Attention & Reading

If labels are to have any effect on consumer behaviour, they must command some degree of attention and consumers have to read them to at least some extent. Much of the early research on consumer use of nutrition labelling has relied on self-reported attention and reading. However, it is generally recognised that such methodologies lead to significant over-reporting. Therefore, the FLABEL consortium is addressing this issue using a far broader set of results based on top down and bottom up factors that use two experimental data gathering techniques; 1) visual search tasks and 2) experimental decision outcome research. All of the preparatory tasks for this research have been completed and the data collection is in progress, once completed it will feed into the other research work packages. This research will be completed during the Summer 2010.

Work Package 3 – Liking & attractiveness

Using a variety of Directive, Semi-directive and Non-directive label types, researchers will investigate degrees of liking based on the provision of completeness of information, the level of complexity, the level of direction and physical attractiveness. These variables will be tested for hedonistic and utilitarian food products and crossed with different socio-demographic factors. Protocols have been established for this research and field studies will be carried out in the summer and fall of 2010.

Furthermore, researchers will apply a novel approach to labelling research by drawing from the vast body of work associated with human interactions with objects. Studies will examine usefulness in situational contexts;

former, present and future experiences. In addition to this, the frequency of label exposure will be studied in relation to liking.

Work Package 4 – Understanding & health inferences

A combination of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies will be used to determine consumer understanding and health inferences from labels. Protocols have been established for a variety of multi-country studies that will consider different socio-demographic factors and employ various techniques including laddering interviews and sorting tasks. Important to this research is the establishment of an objective standard for healthiness to which subjective inferences can be compared.

To optimise data collection and enable relevant comparisons to be made, consortium partners from Work Packages 3 and 4 are working together on a four-country survey that will address aspects of both liking and attractiveness as well as understanding and health inferences. This research is currently on-going and will be completed in September 2010.

Work Package 5 – In-store use of labels

To validate much of the research that has been undertaken in laboratory situations in Work Packages 1-4, WP5 will test label usage in an experimental-store environment. In addition to testing labelling concepts that are currently available on the market through use of a benchmark study, researchers will test conceptual labels that will be developed based on results from the different work packages. To capture consumer reactions in an experimental-store environment, a number of techniques will be used; (hidden) observations, interviews at point of sale, mobile eye-tracking and electro-dermal response. The benchmark study will be completed during the Summer 2010 and the conceptual labelling study will be undertaken in the later part of 2010, when results from work packages 3/4 are available to define the 'hypothetical ideal format label' (in relation to the parameters measured in WP 2-4) to be tested.

Work Package 6 – Effects of nutrition labels on dietary patterns

The consortium is interested to learn about the effects of nutrition labels on dietary intake. To determine this effect, researchers will analyse scanner data obtained by a retailer. Such data will enable the FLABEL consortium to ascertain if the introduction of nutrition labels on products has had an effect on consumer choices over a period of time. In short, has nutrition labelling made a difference to consumer behaviour?

Two types of models will be used to analyse the data; 1) an individual product probability choice model and 2) a shopping basket model. By using these methodologies, the consortium will be able to identify the types of products purchased by certain types of consumers as well as any potential effects across product categories.

Data has been provided by Tesco for the United Kingdom, spanning a 5-year period that covers the introduction of their nutrition labelling on different product categories. The dataset includes information for the year before and the year after the introduction of their nutrition labelling scheme, thus enabling impact assessment.

Work Package 7 – Implications for public policy, retailers and industry, SMEs

Major results from this work package will become available towards the end of the project when the research results from the other work packages are known and stakeholders' reactions to them can be gauged and implications can be discussed. Nevertheless, initial focus groups and quantitative research have been undertaken with key stakeholders to establish a list of major issues in food labelling policy, and work on the identification of needs for policy assessment is on-going.

Work Package 8 – Dissemination & stakeholder involvement

A strategic communication plan has been developed to underpin all of the FLABEL project's research activities. Six dissemination-tasks were completed for reporting period 1-18 months, including the creation of a project logo and graphical identity, website creation, creation and dissemination of a project leaflet, media relations as well as broad outreach through traditional newsletters and new technologies (webinars). In addition to these activities, 17 presentations have been given at key scientific and stakeholder conferences and 4 scientific publications have been submitted to peer-reviewed journals.

To ensure that the project's research programme is founded in reality, a Stakeholder Advisory Board (SAB) has been created comprising national food agencies, consumer representatives, as well as representatives from the food and retail sectors. The SAB meets annually and is provided with periodic progress updates.

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