Putting safety at the top of the food chain

Why food labelling is more important than ever for the consumer

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A fresh approach to food labelling

Food traceability labelling has a key role to play in enabling companies at all stages of the food supply chain to provide information to customers so they can make informed decisions about the food they buy. The food industry want the public to be able to trust the ingredients in food, to know there are no allergens that will do them harm, and that it is safe to eat.

However, in the fast-moving world of food production and distribution, there is huge scope for error in providing the information consumers need. This can put companies at great risk of financial loss or reputational damage.

This paper examines the growing importance of food traceability labelling and looks at how the food industry can address the difficulties it faces in getting it right to help keep customers safe and informed, and strengthen consumer confidence in the food on their plates.

A QUESTION OF TRUST

The spring of 2013 saw a turning point for the food industry when the horsemeat scandal captured the attention of consumers across Europe.

The scandal came to light when Irish food inspectors announced they had found traces of horsemeat in some frozen beef burgers stocked by UK supermarkets. In the following months, stores and suppliers throughout the UK and Europe were forced to remove products labelled as beef after test results showed that they contained traces of horsemeat – in some cases 100%.[1]

The controversy spiralled as consumers, politicians and the media called on food suppliers to explain how the situation had occurred. This resulted in shock headlines, tougher legislation, and a less trusting public.

Both suppliers and retailers lost the confidence of their customers overnight. Although there had been no risk to health, this led to an expectation for the food industry to provide much more information about the origins of food and the journey it takes before arriving on our plates.

While the ripples from this and similar incidents continue to have an impact on the food industry, there are steps that can be taken to strengthen food traceability and ensure the labelling of products provides people with the information they need about the food they purchase and consume.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES

Food labelling has become an essential factor in the food production and distribution industry, but labels are often created and printed in a range of locations by busy retail or warehouse staff who are short of time.

From office spaces and supermarket shop floors to warehouse packaging areas and food preparation rooms, the responsibility for ensuring labelling is accurate and robust can fall to a range of individuals, including managers, office staff and kitchen teams.

In these circumstances, mistakes can easily be made with potentially serious consequences.

In the warehouse

When food products reach the warehouse, they often need to be labelled before being sent on to supermarkets and other retail outlets. At this stage in the journey, the information contained in labelling should include the price, and then, depending on the product, the barcode, allergens and ingredients.

Errors in labelling can cause serious problems when food is being stored prior to sale, particularly when a fast turnover of food is required. If a sandwich supplier cannot get information labels onto all the packaging in good time, they will not be able to send the sandwiches out to retail outlets for sale as the food will be too close to the use-by dates.

On the supermarket floor

Much of the labelling that takes place in supermarkets relates to price, discounts and special offers. Staff are often required to label the food products on trolleys in the supermarket before placing them on the shelves.
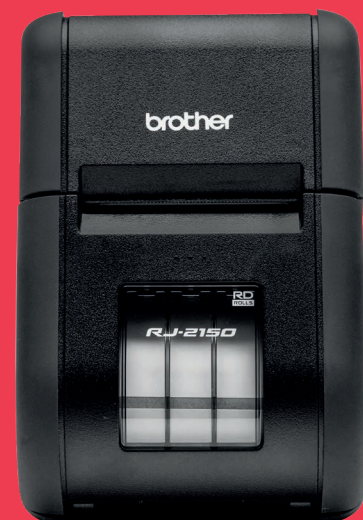
Difficulties with labelling can result in incorrect prices being charged, products not being sold or confusion with use-by dates. Supermarkets rely on their reputation and when food is labelled incorrectly in store, they risk losing the trust of their customers.

At the fresh food counter

Where food is labelled at point of sale, in a supermarket bakery, fish counter or delicatessen, it is usually carried out by busy customer service teams dealing with waiting customers. The information needs to display price, ingredients, allergens and expiry dates.
As these products are often sold in unmarked packaging such as paper bags, this information is absolutely key to informing the customer about their purchase.

If there are problems with fresh food labelling, customers may not know when the product should be consumed by or what it contains. If a customer with a peanut allergy purchases an unlabelled bakery product, for instance, unaware of the allergens it contains, the consequences could be very serious for the individual concerned, and the reputational and financial risk to the food supplier could be considerable.

Consumers are questioning the traceability of their food more than ever

Growing public awareness of consumer packaging regulations has put the food industry under even greater pressure to ensure labelling is accurate and reliable.

Food traceability labelling is increasingly becoming an essential factor in the journey of a food item from the farmer or manufacturer through to distribution, storage and retail.

Getting it right through all these stages is key to ensuring food suppliers meet their obligations and consumers can make an informed choice.

Public demand for information has been driven by a number of key factors:

Meat free diets

Levels of vegetarianism have seen rapid growth in Europe and in recent years, veganism has become increasingly popular. Germany was the leading market for vegan food and drink product launch activity in 2016, with 18% of all global food and drink product launches.2 And an estimated 3.5 million British people – 7% of the population – now claim to follow a plant-based diet.[3]

However, the presence of animal products in a food is sometimes not obvious, for instance, gelatine in sweets, or L-cysteine used as a softening agent. Consumers expect the food industry to accurately label products to help them make more informed choices.

Religious aspects

In an increasingly multi-cultural Europe, halal and kosher products are becoming widely available in supermarkets. This has resulted in a rise in the number of consumers wanting and expecting to see more detailed information such as this on the labelling of the food they are buying and eating.

Ethical food production

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on the ethical implications of how food is grown, produced and sold. This has resulted in a resurgence of interest in regional and seasonal food and the call to reduce 'food miles', or the distance travelled by a food item before it is sold, to cut down on the environmental impact.

Fair trade is an example of this, where retailers and consumers support certification schemes which provide an assurance that farmers in areas of poverty receive a fair price for what they produce. This type of information is sometimes provided on food labelling to help with purchase decisions.

Health and weight control

Trends in diet planning emerge regularly to help us lose weight, gain muscle mass or extend our lives. There has been a rise in speciality diets to combat specific health conditions too, including regimes such as the DASH diet to fend off high blood pressure, the Keto diet for fat loss, and the low FODMAP diet to ease irritable bowel syndrome.

Consumers following these diets want as many details as possible about the nutritional content of their food.

Price

For many consumers, price is the deciding factor in food purchase, and supermarkets often find themselves fighting a price war on everyday food products to retain customer loyalty. In the UK, the success of German discounter outlets, Lidl and Aldi, has had an impact on other large supermarket chains in driving prices down.

Information about price, reductions and offers needs to be in line with regulation and also clearly visible so that consumers can make decisions that fit their budgets.

CONSUMER PROTECTION

Another key issue that is driving a call for more stringent labelling is misinformation about the food we eat. This not only causes consumers to doubt the integrity of the industry, it can also result in health issues or adverse reactions, which can be costly for the companies concerned to resolve but could be avoided if the right information is supplied.

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Lapses in food safety

Incidents of food safety failures and cover-ups such as the 2013 horsemeat scandal have caused consumers to question the traceability of their food more than ever before.

In the Netherlands, eggs exported in Europe were contaminated with insecticide, and the chicken packaging controversy in the UK where a supplier deliberately changed use-by-dates to artificially stretch the shelf-life of the meat.[5]

Alarmed by the news of these food safety lapses, customers increasingly want the reassurance of information about the origin, shelf-life and contents of their food at point of sale.

Allergies

The World Allergy Organisation (WAO) estimate allergy prevalence in the whole population by country ranges between 10 and 40%, while more than 150 million Europeans suffer from chronic allergic diseases.[6]

In the UK, about ten people die every year from food-induced anaphylaxis, and there are also about 1,500 asthma deaths, some of which might be triggered by food allergy.[7]

It is vital that food products are sold with adequate labelling about which allergens they contain, so that serious outcomes as a result of food consumption can be avoided.

Furthermore, after monitoring food poisoning cases in 37 European countries in 2016, a European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) report found that infections such as campylobacteriosis, listeriosis and salmonellosis were becoming more prevalent.[8] These conditions are often caused by poorly cooked, spoiled or incorrectly stored food.

With information about use-by-dates, cooking and storage instructions, consumers can take steps to avoid bacterial contamination and food poisoning.

UNCOVERING THE PAIN POINTS

Despite the growing need for accurate and reliable food labelling, research has shown that in the fast-moving world of food production and distribution, problems can still occur – particularly when essential equipment lets workers down.

In research into food labelling technology commissioned by Brother in 2018, 200 food industry staff in the UK, France and Germany, were asked about their level of satisfaction and experiences with food traceability label printing.

The results highlighted some key areas of concern

Difficult to use;

A common frustration among warehouse staff is that label printing equipment can be difficult to use, slowing down the labelling process and making a simple job time consuming.

"Basically we have one person on site that is able to modify any labels using a piece of software that is not very user friendly."

- Fish processing company, UK

"Changing the roll is inconvenient. A simpler door to make it as easy as changing a camera film is what I want."

- Hypermarket, France

"Sometimes the labels get caught in the machine and it still picks them up as if it's printing them. It just wraps around and the stickers get stuck inside the machine so you have to throw them out."

- Fish wholesale company, UK

Poor quality;

Labels for food storage and distribution need to be robust enough to stay attached until the product reaches the supermarket shelves, but this isn't always the case.

Some warehouse staff find their labels are not sufficiently resistant to water.

"Quality. Especially the degradation of ink because of moisture. I think we may not be using the most appropriate process for our field of work, but I do not know."

- Production, distribution and meat wholesaler, France

"Sometimes we have to bring the product back to re-label... if certain information has rubbed off/not legible. We have to make sure all products that are sent out are legible."

- Pie and dessert supplier, UK

Slow print speed;

Time is of the essence when food needs to be labelled, stacked on the shelf and sold to customers while it is still fresh. When the printer slows this process down, it causes frustrations.

"Some of them (printers) are rather slow at printing. They also need breaks. So if you're having to print a job for 80 branch offices and several items at the same time, this can take a long time."

- Bakery, Germany

"The number of steps to create the label could be improved. It takes a long time to print the labels."

- Supermarket, Germany

Warehouses and retail outlets are typically busy working environments and there can be pressure to carry out essential tasks quickly

"The problem is that we have to do a lot of things suddenly; we do not necessarily have the time to do as we would like."

- Hypermarket, France

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Time is of the essence when food needs to be labelled

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Food comes in all shapes and sizes, and when it comes to information labels, one size doesn't fit all

A FRESH APPROACH

In a world where the food industry is committed to provide consumers with more detailed information about the food they are purchasing and consuming, there is no longer a place for food traceability labels that are too difficult to read or fall off before the product reaches the shelves.

The time is right for the food industry to take a new approach in tackling the challenges it faces and consign food labelling problems to the history books.

Demand for more efficient printing

Staff in supermarkets, food counters, offices and warehouses want to be able to work much more quickly and efficiently to ensure that the food they supply is correctly labelled. Advances in technology in recent years have made this much more achievable.

Reliability;

For warehouse staff who label food products, the priority is to cut down on printing time so they can produce information labels to ensure that stock is correctly stored, priced and dispatched. A fast printing speed coupled with barcode label design software helps to ensure the whole label printing process is much more streamlined.

Ease of use;

A busy supermarket worker doesn't want to spend time changing paper rolls as their shelves are emptying and lengthy queues are forming. Portable printers allow staff to instantly print labels with nutritional details, expiry dates and prices when they are out on the shop floor – and even while they are serving customers.

Design

Food comes in all shapes and sizes, and when it comes to information labels, one size doesn't fit all. When label design software is included in a printer, it becomes much easier to create the type of label that is needed for the job. If the situation requires a non-standard label, a printer with built-in cutters will allow custom labels that are the right size to be printed quickly and easily.

Durability

Delivery companies and distribution centres need to know that food traceability labels will remain attached when food products are on the move. It can be a long journey from the supplier to the warehouse, and from the retail outlet to the customer's fridge. High quality label rolls which are water resistant, have good adhesive properties and are made from non-toxic materials will ensure the labels stay put until the product is used.
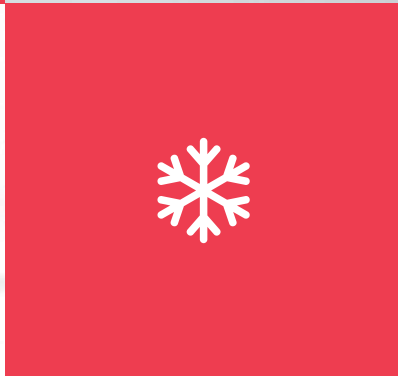
Clarity

Customers often have only a matter of seconds in front of the supermarket shelf to make an informed decision about their purchase. Easy to read labels with clear text and logos are essential for customers to decide whether or not to buy an item. And high contrast printing ensures that staff and customers alike no longer have to experience the frustration of barcodes that don't scan properly.

The food industry is governed by legislation on food labelling, and businesses need printing equipment that enables them to meet the legal requirements of their country too. Legislation can change, and businesses need the flexibility to be able to adjust the way information is formatted and presented so they can meet evolving labelling requirements.

Fast printing speed coupled with barcode label design software helps to ensure the whole label printing process is much more streamlined

Legislation on food labelling

In Europe, EU regulations along with individual country legislation applies to food packaging and labelling. Labelling rules vary according to the product and the packaging type, but in general, full and clear information must be visible on the packaging.

In the UK, the Food Standards Agency, an independent food safety watchdog responsible for food safety and hygiene provides guidelines on food labelling.[9] The 14 major foods which can cause allergic reactions must be declared if they are an ingredient in food, or a processing aid used during the manufacture of food and drink products.

Voluntary guidelines

A range of voluntary codes and standards for food labelling have been adopted in different countries across Europe.

In Germany, BMEL, the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture, sets food labelling standards.[10] One of the BMEL's initiatives is regional food labelling to ensure that consumers can identify regional products more easily when purchasing. The Regionalfenster (regional label) offers a transparent system for labelling regional products and consumers should be able to see from a quick glance at the packaging whether and to what extent a particular product is regional.

European guidelines for food labelling

EU Regulation (no. 1169/2011) and individual country legislation applies to food packaging and labelling, much of it harmonised.

Labelling rules vary according to the product and the packaging type; in general, full and clear information must be visible on the packaging.

Typically, labels must show: use-by date, origin of product, allergens, quantity, name of food, ingredients, nutritional value, name and address of the manufacturer, packer or seller, storage conditions and cooking instructions (if relevant).

CONCLUSION

The food industry is under pressure to respond to increased consumer demand for information about food. Controversies around food safety lapses combined with a trend for healthier, more informed eating is driving the need for clarity on the ingredients, allergens and nutritional value in food products.

Food traceability labelling has a key role to play in equipping businesses in the food sector with the means to provide their customers with information and to meet changing legislative requirements for food to be correctly labelled through each stage in the supply chain.

Labelling has the power to restore the public's trust in the safety of their food. So, when it is carried out at various stages in the food journey and in busy working environments by staff under time constraints, printing and labelling processes need to be as straightforward as possible.

Specialist food printing and labelling can save time and free staff to focus on ensuring the warehouse or shop floor runs efficiently, so that by the time a food product reaches the shopping basket, a customer knows exactly what they are buying.

Brother portable printer ranges provide the perfect solution for food labelling at all stages of production. Our products are specifically designed to optimise workflows with built in features making them easy to operate and manage. For more information on our products and services, please contact;

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