

Will a new logo work

By early 2011 there should be one new health logo for food products, says the Dutch government. The current range of logos are a hit with producers, but consumers don't seem to take much notice of them. Will that change if there is just one logo? TEXT KORNE VERSLUIS PHOTOS GUY ACKERMANS

FRANS KOK,

professor of Nutrition and Health
at Wageningen UR

'As far as I'm concerned only staple foods should be allowed to carry the logo'



'I am not very impressed with the current logos. The thinking is that items in any product category, from staple foods to extras such as sauces and snacks, can carry a logo if they are healthier than other similar items. I don't think that that is the way forward. You're giving people an alibi to eat unhealthy foods: it's OK, because it says on the package that it is healthier.'

As far as I'm concerned only staple foods should be allowed to carry such a logo. With these products you can put together a healthy menu that provides 100 percent of the required nutrients. That would give you about 75 percent of your daily intake of calories, leaving you enough leeway for the odd ice-cream, drink or snack, for instance.

The standards required for a logo are not strict enough at the moment, and that is surely because the initiative comes from within the industry. I would favour one logo taking two forms: a 'gold brand' and a 'silver brand'. The 'gold brand' logo would indicate that a product is fully in line with the nutritional guidelines, and the silver one that it is on the right track but hasn't yet ticked all the right boxes. This would give companies something to work towards without excluding them from the start. Working to achieve one single logo is a good thing, but I am concerned about whether it will happen. Albert Heijn and Unilever have a long history of differing opinions about these logos. It remains to be seen whether they can settle their differences. And if they can, the question remains what other food manufacturers will do. It's high time the Dutch government took over the reins in establishing a uniform logo to which all parties have to conform.'

better?

MARIEKE MEEUSEN,

researcher at LEI, part of Wageningen UR, published – together with Marcel Kornelis – a study on the effects of the ‘Conscious Choice’ logo on consumers

‘I doubt whether the new logo will make much impact’

‘We measured whether the ‘Conscious Choice’ logo makes people buy more of a product, but this hardly seems to be the case. We singled out four product groups to see if the introduction of a new product with the logo on it influenced the sales figures: custard, yoghurt, instant soup and fruit drinks. Given the producers’ eagerness to carry the logo, we expected some market cannibalism from other brands and products, but we didn’t see this happen. It seems that the impact is negligible. The introduction of new products seems to create a stir on the market, whether or not they carry a logo. We can’t directly attribute the effect to the logo; it’s more the fact that a product is new that makes consumers buy it. We have just done a study on how people without higher education view the logo. We noticed that people by no means always trust the logo. These companies just put a stash of money on the table and then they get permission to use the logo.’

Something else that doesn’t do much for confidence is that the ‘Conscious Choice’ logo appears on unhealthy products such as liquorice and chips. It doesn’t seem to me such a difficult message that products carrying a logo are relatively healthy compared to other products of the same type, but then people already have so many logos to look at. Animal welfare ratings with two or three stars, the ‘eko’ logo, to name but two. So that message is quite complicated after all. Which is why it seems to me a sensible idea – for the consumer anyway – to have just the one logo instead of two. But whether it will make a great impact on the consumer, I have my doubts.’



FROM TWO TO ONE

The ‘Conscious Choice’ logo was introduced by Unilever and dairy company FrieslandCampina in 2006. Albert Heijn supermarket had just launched its own health logo, the ‘Healthy Choice’ cloverleaf, which is on the staple products of the supermarket’s own brand.

On the basis of an advisory report by the Health Council of the Netherlands, minister Klink has demanded that Albert Heijn and ‘Conscious Choice’ introduce one single logo by 1 January 2011. Both parties recently said they were confident that they would succeed in this.

‘People do not always trust the logo’

‘One logo is easier to grasp for the consumer’

HANS DAGEVOS,

researcher with LEI, part of Wageningen UR,
who compiled the book Health Logos on Food

‘It could be that the logo invites compensation behaviour. Something like: you can allow yourself one more of a product with the logo on it’

‘The ‘Conscious Choice’ logo has three aims: making it easier for the consumer to choose healthy food; encouraging manufacturers to produce healthier food; and promoting public health. It isn’t clear yet whether this logo achieves these aims. The first one, facilitating a healthy choice, has not been properly researched yet. The VU University Amsterdam has looked in people’s shopping baskets and concluded that those who are well informed about the logo also tend to buy more products carrying the symbol. But whether it makes them live more healthily, we don’t know. It could be that the logo invites compensation behaviour. Something like: you can allow yourself one more of a product with the logo on it. It’s a known fact, for instance, that people leave low-energy light bulbs switched on for longer. That sort of compensation behaviour could also occur with food. These logos are an important attempt to get people to eat more healthily, but there is much more to food than that. What you eat is related to your environment, to culture, to psychology. One tiny little logo can’t be expected to encompass all that.

Producers seem to take a good deal of trouble over product innovation. At any rate they produce impressive statistics about the tons of trans fats, sugar and salt they have cut out of their products. But there are sure to be companies amongst them who see that they can meet the criteria without much trouble and who join the scheme for that reason. One of the chapters in the book was written by marketing people, by the way. They have a different outlook on this. If there are several logos, they can compete and that makes them sharpen up their criteria. That would be lost if there only was one logo. And a logo is more than just a list of criteria. Chiquita, for example, is working very hard to build a positive image by cooperating with the Rain Forest Alliance. There you can see how a company and a logo organization can work together. If there are several logos you stand more chance of building up something like that. But that advantage may be smaller than the disadvantage of consumer confusion. From a health angle one logo will be better – easier to grasp for the consumer.’



DICK VEERMAN,

initiator of foodlog.nl, presented his own logo at the end of April: kijkofhetklopt.nl

‘The philosophy behind these logos starts from a negative premise: we have gone wrong in the past, and now we are planning to go a little less wrong’

‘The ‘Conscious Choice’ logo makes people stupid. It’s stuck on junk food that has been made a little less junky. If it said ‘Conscious Less Unhealthy Choice’ I wouldn’t be making a fuss, but as it is, it’s just a lot of nonsense. For example, there is a product called ‘Vitaminwater’ on the market now, water with sugar and vitamin C in it. The vitamin C you don’t need and everyone knows that sugar is bad for you. Unhealthy water, in other words, and yet it has the ‘Conscious Choice’ logo on it. Because Sourcy describes it as a soft drink with less sugar in it. It’s a con, and people know it is.

Another hilarious example is the ice-cream gateau with the ‘Conscious Choice’ logo on it. According to Ola you could eat their gateau every day. Up till now nobody needed telling that it’s not a brilliant plan to eat ice-cream gateau on a daily basis. Meanwhile the logo is also on apples and spinach. Which everyone already knew to be fine. So where does this leave us? Do we need another new idea to protect us against this sort of daft practice which labels spinach and ice-cream gateau as equally healthy?

The philosophy behind these logos starts from a negative premise: we have gone wrong in the past, and now we are planning to go a little less wrong. We start from a positive principle: transparency. People want to know what they are eating, although they don’t want all the information in one go. They are very capable of finding out for themselves what they want to know. No one reads the newspaper from cover to cover either - we each read what interests us most. We would like a wiki website where everyone can find information about food products and discuss them. Let people work out for themselves what they really want to buy.’ ■

‘It’s a con, and people know it is’

**CONSCIOUS CHOICE**

The number of products featuring a ‘Conscious Choice’ logo is growing fast. By the end of 2009, 4,750 products from 118 producers were permitted to carry the logo. To qualify, products must fulfill certain requirements such as not containing too much sugar, salt or the wrong kind of fats. Comparisons are made with products within one category. In this way it is possible for unhealthy products such as sweets and snacks to carry the logo because they compare favourably with the competition.