

The sustainab

The Dutch say they care about the planet, about animal welfare and about poverty, but they don't choose sustainable products in the supermarket. 'You go to the supermarket to do your shopping, not to save the world.' Negative logos could help.

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le option

The resolve to create a sustainable world is no different to a New Year's resolution, says researcher Ynte van Dam. Such resolutions are perfectly sincere but they start to fade as soon as it rains too hard to go to the gym. 'The goal is abstract and faraway. The choice is concrete and nearby. So the abstract resolution soon disappears from the picture.' A researcher in the Marketing and Consumer Behaviour chair group, Van Dam obtained his doctorate in March with his research on sustainable consumption.

A report on *The Dutch and Sustainable Food*, published last year by the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, confirms that consumers find it hard to put their good resolutions into practice. According to that report, three quarters of the Dutch think the government should promote products with a label for sustainability or animal welfare. Yet only one in ten

Dutch shoppers buy such products themselves on a weekly basis. Price is the biggest obstacle to buying them more often, surveys reveal. But Van Dam thinks price is not the only problem. 'By slapping labels on products that score above average, supermarkets send the message that non-sustainable consumption is normal. You should do that the other way round of course.'

Van Dam researched his idea by getting test subjects to choose on a computer screen between products with and without a logo. He used the familiar EKO logo but also a non-EKO logo he designed himself. The latter turned out to have much more effect than the former. Test subjects were far more willing to pay extra to avoid products with a non-EKO logo than to opt for the positive EKO logo.

A neat result for a scientist, but not very practical. Producers are not going to want to bring in negative logos, and why would the government make such a logo compulsory? Van Dam: 'You never know. I could never

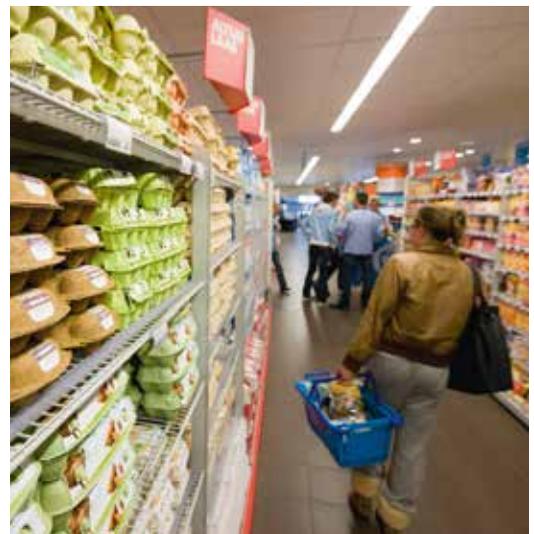


PHOTO HOLLANDESE HOOGTE

The supermarket shopper has a choice of a wide range of eggs with many different labels.

have imagined 30 years ago that there would now be stickers on cigarette packs saying "Smoking kills".'

ENERGY GUZZLERS

What is more, Van Dam believes there are subtler ways of using a negative label too. The introduction of an energy label on household appliances, for example, soon caused energy guzzling appliances to disappear from the shops. Since 1995 it has been a requirement for fridges, washing machines and other appliances to carry an energy label with a score which first went from A to G and now ranges from A+++ to D. Ever since then, consumers have gone for fridges in the top half of the range, so appliances have become much more energy-saving. By using logos such as these, supermarkets could help their customers live up to their good intentions. Gerrit Antonides, professor of the Economics of Consumers and Households, agrees with Van Dam: >



GERRIT ANTONIDES

professor of the Economics of Consumers and Households at Wageningen University

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YNTE VAN DAM

researcher of consumer behaviour at Wageningen University

‘Labels on products that score above average send the message that non-sustainable consumption is normal’

negative labels work better. Antonides: ‘People are loss-averse.’ The psychological impact of losing a 50 euro note is bigger than that of finding one. And this aversion to loss goes beyond hard cash. ‘Buying a product with a negative label is seen as a loss in relation to the norm. The existing labels place the emphasis on profits, but people are more sensitive to losses.’

Another common phenomenon in behavioural economics, says Antonides, is that in surveys people paint a more positive picture of their willingness to pay extra for sustainable or animal-friendly products than the reality of the choices they make in the supermarket. ‘We call that cheap talk. If you ask people how much extra they’d pay in an imaginary scenario to give chickens more space, they concentrate entirely on that issue, whereas when they are in the supermarket they weigh up different priorities. There are so many things you can spend your money on.’

TOO COMPLICATED

The world of ethical logos is pretty complicated, it has to be said. For eggs alone there are 19 different labels and logos, from free-range and EKO to Gijs eggs and Hema Better Life. Hardly anyone knows exactly what they stand for. And the same applies in other areas.

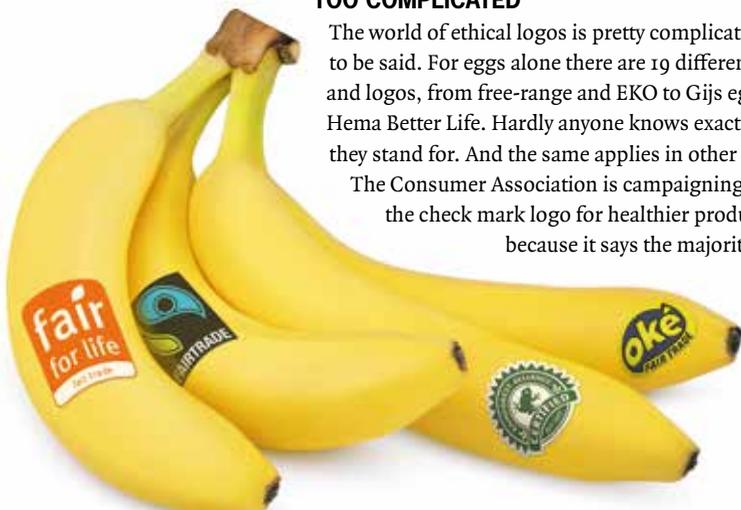
The Consumer Association is campaigning against the check mark logo for healthier products because it says the majority of

consumers have no idea what the check mark on products means.

For the people who are serious about sustainability and know the difference between all the labels, there are other decisions to make. What do you put first, animal welfare or the planet? Free-range pigs and organic chickens use more feed, giving them a bigger ecological footprint than their less fortunate fellows on regular farms. So which is more important?

Koen Boone of LEI Wageningen UR is working on a measuring instrument intended to bring some order to the chaos around ethical labels. He is director of the European branch of The Sustainability Consortium (TSC), a collaboration between almost 100 research institutes, NGOs and companies including numerous multinationals such as Walmart, Coca-Cola, Ahold and Unilever. Together with four research institutes, one of them Wageningen UR, they have identified the main sustainability issues for each product group, and ways of measuring them. In the case of washing powders, for instance, the big questions are whether the palm oil used in manufacturing the detergent comes from plantations carved out of tropical rainforest, and whether it washes well at low temperatures. The issues for clothing are child labour, working conditions in the factories and the environmental impact of the production of cotton and dyes.

TSC does not target consumers directly with its research results. Boone: ‘We think the biggest improvements can be made by the buyers working for supermarkets and other retailers. They have more time to go into the various sustainability aspects of a product but they don’t have so much time that they can embark on a scientific study. You could look at about 200 aspects per product. To enable buyers to assess a product properly, we have





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director of Questionmark

‘The producers of A brands don’t want a single blot on the copybooks’



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‘The biggest improvements can be made by the buyers for supermarkets’

made a list of the main 10 to 15 sustainability issues per product group.’

TSC published the first report with figures on the sustainability scores of the member companies in May.

Boone: ‘We are going to do that every year so we can see whether we really do the things we plan to do.’

METAL TIES

For the time being there is only anecdotal evidence that this method is working. Walmart, for example, has asked major toy manufacturers to stop using metal ties to attach dolls and trucks to their packaging. ‘You know, those things that drive parents crazy when they are trying to undo them at Christmas.’ TSC’s concern was that its analysis showed that the metal ties add to the negative environmental impact of toys.

Boone: ‘You are not going to save the world by taking metal ties out of toy packaging but we think that if you take small steps like that on many fronts, the combined impact can be very big. The combined turnover of the companies participating is three times the Gross National Product of the Netherlands, and there are another 2000 companies that haven’t joined us but do use our methods. An improvement of just a few percent really does make a difference on the global scale.’

The metal ties also demonstrate, says Boone, that this can often be done in ways that benefit all parties. ‘Those things are used in toy packaging just out of habit, not because there’s no other way of doing it. Nobody has ever stopped to think about it. Identifying where gains can be made will throw up more of these sorts of examples.’

But Van Dam does not believe companies will change radically without pressure from consumers.

‘Governments and companies almost always see change as something that has to come from the consumer.

There must be a demand for it, is what they say. And then you get everyone pointing the finger at everyone else. If change has to come from the consumer, you have to make it easier for them to make ethical choices.’

BARCODES

One of the solutions to this is provided by the new Questionmark app. If you’re having breakfast and you want to know whether the cocoa in the chocolate sprinkles was made with slave labour, or how ethical your egg is, you only have to pick up your smartphone and scan the barcode. The app then tells you how people- and animal-friendly the product is. Questionmark has its own calculation method for giving products scores for environment, animal welfare and human rights. In April the company announced that the calculations will be based on the checklist of key sustainability criteria for each product group drawn up by The Sustainability Consortium. ‘This enables companies to report clearly and it makes the results easier to compare,’ says Questionmark director Charlotte Linnebank. Questionmark has evaluated more than 33,000 products. ‘We think that this way we can work on sustainability on two fronts,’ says Linnebank. ‘We are not targeting the dark green consumer who is already very well-informed, but trying to provide people who would really like to make their shopping habits more sustainable with easily accessible information. And on the other hand we make our analysis available to companies. The producers of A brands definitely don’t want a single blot on the copybooks. They want to be sure they are ahead of the field. By publishing our comparisons, we stimulate them to improve their products.’ ■

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