

Consumer Trends: Americans Confused by Food and Beverage Labels

NEW YORK (PRNewswire) — Ever stood in the aisle of a grocery store completely overwhelmed by the claims jumping out from the labels? You may not be alone. Health advocacy groups have long decried America's nutrition labeling system as misleading, confusing and, ultimately, inaccurate, and the FDA recently announced plans to overhaul it for the first time in two decades. But just how much do Americans value nutrition against other factors, such as cost and convenience, when making decisions on their grocery runs? And how much faith are they placing in those more general claims, such as Healthy, Guilt Free or Reduced... well... anything? Our findings indicate that while Americans are straight on some of the claims, they're still in need of the skinny on others.

When asked how helpful they believe each of a series of common food packaging statements are in guiding them toward nutritious choices in the grocery store, results were mixed. Many of the more carefully regulated claims are held in high esteem, though at least one appears to be experiencing some consumer confusion. Conversely, some of the less meaningful claims are seen as helpful by majorities of consumers in their quest for nutritious choices.

These are some of the results of The Harris Poll® of 2,266 adults surveyed online between February 12 and 17, 2014. ([Full findings, including data tables, available here](#) [1])

The Good...

Nearly three-fourths of Americans (73%) feel packages proclaiming their contents to be "fresh" are helpful in guiding them towards healthy choices – and well they should. Fact: Only products which have never been frozen or warmed and which contain no preservatives can qualify for such a claim.

Strong majorities also see the following claims as helpful which makes sense as each has strict criteria the products need to meet in order to qualify for such claims:

- High in/Good Source of (e.g., High in Fiber, Good Source of Calcium) – 73%
- Low (e.g., Low Sodium, Low Cholesterol) – 71%
- Free (e.g., Fat Free, Cholesterol Free) – 68%
- Lean – 65%

Americans are more divided on whether seeing "healthy" on a food package is a helpful indicator that nutrition lies within, with 53% feeling it's helpful and 47% indicating it's not. In fact, this claim is strictly regulated across a broad nutritional

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spectrum, with specific limits on its fat, saturated fat, cholesterol and sodium content; products displaying this claim also need to have at least 10% of the recommended daily value for a range of nutrients.

The Bad...

Roughly three-fourths of U.S. adults (76%) feel that the statement "Made with..." – as in, "Made with Whole Grains" or "Made with Real Fruit" – is a helpful signpost in navigating their way to a healthy meal. Unfortunately, they're mistaken; the fact is, these labels can be applied to anything that contains even very small amounts of the boasted content.

Majorities also find packages advertising their wares as natural, all natural or 100% natural (62%) and lightly sweetened or low sugar (60%) to be helpful in directing them toward nutritious choices. However, the FDA has never established an official definition for natural claims. Lightly sweetened and low sugar are similarly undefined, with the low sugar claim in particular sometimes drawing attention away from sweetening accomplished through other products.

Americans seem fairly clear, however, on "Guilt Free," with just over three-fourths (76%) saying it's not helpful in guiding them toward nutritious choices in the grocery store; they're right, incidentally. The claim has no legal meaning.

And the ones in the middle...

Americans show mixed attitudes toward two labels which are helpful – to a point: a majority (57%) feel a "Reduced" claim – a la "Reduced Calories" or "Reduced Fat" – is an indicator of nutritious wares, while fewer than half (45%) put the same stock in claims of "Light" or "Lite." These claims are in fact both strictly regulated by the FDA, with guidelines requiring they be specific percentages lower than comparable "regular" products in fat, calories or other criteria. This does not necessarily mean the products are low in these factors though, so it's important in such cases to turn that package around and read the nutritional facts in full.

The Price of Nutrition

When asked which factors play roles when deciding between food products at the grocery store, cost is the top consideration no matter how you cut it:

- 52% of Americans rate it very important – at least twice as many as say the same for any other factor.
- Cost is followed distantly on this measure by fat (26%), sugar (24%), sodium (also 24%) and caloric (21%) content, while fewer than two in ten find the remaining factors very important.
- When asked to select the most important consideration when deciding between food products at the grocery store, roughly half of Americans (49%)

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point to cost.

- Cost is in this case followed distantly by combined (29%) mentions of fat (8%), caloric (8%), sodium (8%) and sugar (5%) content.

To see other recent Harris Polls, please visit the [Harris Poll News Room](#) [2].

Methodology

This Harris Poll was conducted online within the United States between February 12 and 17, 2014 among 2,266 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, The Harris Poll avoids the words "margin of error" as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Poll surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the adult population. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in our panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

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