

Labeling: Are We Leveling With Consumers?

Early in my food science career, I heard a story about how Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) was creative in its new product innovation. The company's unique method of cooking chicken delivered a terrific-tasting product. But when people ate the chicken, their hands became sticky. Initially, consumers complained and considered this a defect. Rather than simply accepting the consumers' verdict that this was a serious defect, the folks at KFC hit upon the creative idea of making the defect a virtue with the advertising slogan: "Finger Lickin' Good." And the rest, as they say, is history.

Thus, sometimes in the food industry we need to think through our immediate reactions to an issue and also to think through the consumers' reaction, particularly if either of them seems to be inherently negative. We also need to recognize that our customers have needs that go beyond the obvious services our products provide. Today's consumers want to know more about how their food was produced and this desire is simply getting stronger. Yet, when it comes to providing information to consumers, especially for something the industry perceives as a negative, we are often our own worst enemy. The reaction is to fight against providing the information rather than working with consumers to help them understand, including the idea

of reasonable risk after going through a scientific process to establish safety and efficacy.

A major example of this reluctance to share information with consumers is labeling. Whenever the industry does anything really new, which tends to garner more publicity, it is also likely to generate some controversy spurred on by the activist groups.

The natural solution seems to be to roll out the change, but not to flag or even label it,

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if not required by law. Well, that, I believe, is absolutely the wrong thing to do. I would argue that the industry should label it as "Finger Lickin' Good" and be proud to take leadership in adopting new technology. Unfortunately, there are too many examples of not labeling: water-added scallops (which actually taste better), using irradiated spices (which avoid both pathogens and invasive species), carbon monoxide (smokeless smoke, which maintains the desired color of products through the global food chain), and, of course, the really big issues now of genetically modified organisms (GMOs, such as the chymosin enzyme used in most large-scale cheese making), and nanotechnology.

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community has had much more success in attacking the food industry for not labeling products than it really has had in convincing consumers that the technology is bad for them. Making the food industry look secretive and uncommunicative is so much easier to do. And we hand them this opportunity again and again.

If you look back at many of these issues, the real disconnect with the consumer was not with the actual product

but with the information being withheld. In fact, I would venture to strongly suggest that in most cases a majority of consumers will buy the product regardless of what is on the label (as opposed to what they'll say in a survey).

Many new technological developments are great stories and can be "Finger Lickin' Good." And if we go beyond the strict requirements of the law, the industry would be perceived as more proactive and more consumer-friendly. We could be perceived as trying to improve our products to fill consumer needs and to provide the latest in value-added for consumers. And, yes, a few customers won't buy it just because it is new technology. But the activists won't be as successful in paint-

ing the industry in a bad light. By not labeling, we are handing the issues to the activists.

There is also the flipside of this argument. Why must we market our products by denigrating the potentially negative attributes of someone else's product? Why is the industry the source of some of the food "fear mongering"?

And finally, what about all those terms we're sticking on our labels (and in our advertising) that are sometimes

justified but just as often plainly misleading? For example: free range, natural, local. When these words are misused, we not only cheapen the words, but we cheapen the entire food industry. So when we have a real problem, the consumer is already weary of the food industry and no longer trusts us even after we go through hoops to make corrections.

Yes, we really can be our worst enemy by not leveling with consumers. We need to trust them to make good decisions most of the time. And treating them with respect would go a long way. **FT**

Joe Regenstein, Ph.D., a Professional Member of IFT, is Professor, Dept. of Food Science, Cornell University, 116 Stocking Hall, Ithaca, N.Y. 14853 (jmr9@cornell.edu).