

Independent health symbols on packaging are key to affordable healthy diets

Submitted by: BlueSky Education

Wednesday, 25 August 2021

Independent health symbols on packaging are key to affordable healthy diets

Printing recognisable health symbols on product packaging can reverse misconceptions around the healthiness of low-cost items, leading to a sales boost for manufacturers as well as fostering healthier purchasing choices for budget shoppers, research from Imperial College Business School reveals.

Within the forthcoming paper, *Going Healthy: How Product Characteristics Influence the Sales Impact of Front-of-Pack Health Symbols*, set to be published in the *Journal of the Academic of Marketing Science*, research led by Dr Stijn Maesen, Assistant Professor of Marketing at Imperial College Business School, examined the performance implications of adding a health symbol to a product's packaging.

With misperceptions among consumers still commonplace around the nutritional value of low-cost items, as well as products with a front-of-pack taste claim and retailer-owned brands, Maesen and his team found that adding a recognisable, accredited health symbol can overcome existing beliefs and boost sales.

The researchers focused on the use of the Choices health symbol, present within the Dutch market between 2011 and 2015. While later dropped, when in use the Choices symbol was well-established and trusted with high consumer awareness, leading to instant recognition and acceptance at the point of purchase.

Covering 3,970 products across 29 categories over a four-year period, Maesen also found that the use of a credible health symbol can be beneficial for items within a product category already considered to be healthy by consumers.

According to the study, manufacturers can gain a sales boost of more than eight per cent by adding a credible health symbol, such as Choices on the front of the pack, in a healthy product category such as seeds or frozen vegetables.

In a product category that is generally considered unhealthy by consumers, such as mayonnaise or condiments, a health sticker can still generate a sales uplift of around three per cent.

For products eligible to carry a health symbol but that don't, the absence is likely to make the product more vulnerable to competition, the researchers suggest. Within their study they found that adding the health symbol to a product has a negative impact on competitive products.

Dr Stijn Maesen, Assistant Professor of Marketing at Imperial College Business School, says:

"What's key to this research is the credibility and acceptance of the health accreditation programme associated with the application of a health symbol. Looking at public health policy, the study provides ample evidence of the value to governments adopting or investing in a programmes like that of Choices.

"Provided it is seen by consumers as independent, scientifically robust and therefore trusted as a

relative measure of healthiness within an individual category, the addition of a health symbol can persuade consumers to switch to healthier options in an unhealthy category without increasing demand overall, thus leading to obvious public health benefits.”

According to the researchers, the study is pivotal for manufacturers, retailers and policymakers, looking at the real-life context of volume sales on a broad scale, and tapping into the growing trend for healthy food and beverages.

Addressing the difficulties consumers have with Nutritional Food Panels, which are complex for consumers to navigate when making quick purchasing decisions, and when faced with an array of promotional messages, the study points to clear benefits of accredited health symbols on product packaging.

END/

For more information, a copy of the paper, or to speak to Dr Stijn Maesen, contact Jonny Stone at jonny@bluesky-pr.com or call 01582 790704.