

Process Food Labels: Good Info or Confusing to Consumers?



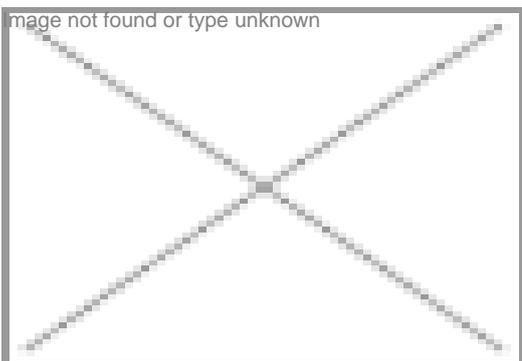
By *Hank Campbell* — January 14, 2016

In the early days of food labeling and regulations, it was just about mandating honesty. If you go to buy mayonnaise, [you shouldn't have to wonder if it is mayonnaise](#) [1], the government reasoned, so they passed a law in 1938 requiring honesty about ingredients. The charlatans went out of the business and the free market that remained embraced "better" ingredients as a marketing distinction. It worked well. Better ingredients meant a better product and people who cared about higher quality or superior health for their families embraced labels that connoted higher quality, in a "you get what you pay for" way. "You are what you eat" is now part of the lexicon.

More recently, though, labels have become a way to promote self-identification with a world view -- you are more ethical, and care more about your children and the developing world and the whole planet, if you buy a special label. Sometimes labels are promoting what isn't in food, so "you don't get what you pay for."

The free market has embraced that also. Lots of companies advertise that its process uses no gluten or GMOs or synthetic pesticides. The Campbell Soup Co. recently announced they were going to put a "we contain GMOs" label on their products [and I applauded them for it](#) [2]; it's brilliant marketing because they don't have to take anything out, and people afraid of modern life don't buy Campbell's Soup anyway, because it is "processed" food. But they are getting a lot of free publicity from anti-science groups like U.S. Right To Know and Environmental Working Group.

Yay capitalism. But at what point do these process labels -- organic, kosher, natural, shade grown -- do more harm for public understanding of food than good?



Background image from Joshua Rainey Photography/Shutterstock;
Foreground image from Matthew Cole/Shutterstock. Adapted by [CAST](#)

[3]

It's a valid question because we no longer live in 1862, when President Abraham Lincoln created

the Department of Agriculture because 90 percent of America worked in agriculture and understood what food is and is not, and how it is made. Today, only 1 percent of Americans work on a farm. When you grew your own food and someone said "you are what you eat," you knew what that meant.

What are you when Kroger determines what you eat?

In our book *Science Left Behind*, my co-author Dr. Alex Berezow recounted the story of a Seattle coffee shop where a well-meaning employee told him all the things he was *not* getting in the store's milk. To a scientist, it was a meaningless [nocebo](#) ^[4] gimmick but the bulk of the public won't have a PhD in biology. So if someone notes their stuff *doesn't* have recombinant bovine somatotropin (rBST, a hormone to increase milk production) it is perfectly normal for the public to assume rBST must be bad.

That is exactly the intent of groups like Just Label It and SourceWatch, when they try to get GMO warning labels placed on food. Being "deniers for hire" helps get them donations but more worrisome is that the less knowledgeable public (that is not a criticism, science *is* complex) is scared into thinking that science can't be trusted.

What is the truth? [The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has cracked down on dairies claiming they have "no hormones"](#) ^[5] by not using rBST because all milk contains naturally occurring BST regardless of rBST use. There is no difference in the milk, other than economic. Dairy prices are regulated by the government so margins are slim and rBST is more efficient.

But scientists don't have the benefit of skills -- therefore, science is easy to undermine because it is the status quo. You are not "sticking it to The Man" if you stand up for science, because most science is done by corporations and activists groups rely on, [as Andras Baneth, Head of the Public Affairs Council's European office, notes](#) ^[6], "outrage" and the "promise of empowerment" if they make a donation or spam a member of Congress with email.

The Council for Agricultural Science and Technology (CAST) group [recently released a new document on how opinion, in the form of process labels, is increasingly used to undermine credible science](#) ^[7], which risks increased food prices -- poor consumers will always be impacted most there -- and limiting uptake of technology and science in agriculture.

Should process labels be mandatory? Should they be banned? Some who are pro-GMO argue just that, former-anti-science-activist-turned-GMO-advocate Mark Lynas among them. But doing so cedes the science ground to marketing and opinion. Organic food is just a process, so why give it a competitive advantage using legislative fiat about labels? Why not mandate "shade grown" on labels? Why not ban "natural"? It sounds silly, but it isn't because no one can opt out of food. Therefore it is a values issue.

Thanks to process label confusion, you are what you eat has become you are what you think you eat, and the authors of the CAST paper, Professor Kent D. Messer from the University of Delaware, et al., want to eliminate existing confusion and turn the phrase into you are what you know you eat by advocating labels that are "clear, science-based, and consumer friendly."

I couldn't agree more.

COPYRIGHT © 1978-2016 BY THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON SCIENCE AND HEALTH

Source URL: <https://www.acsh.org/news/2016/01/14/process-labels-bridging-the-information-gap-or-confusing-consumers>

Links

[1] http://www.science20.com/science_20/blog/vegan_just_mayo_gets_approval_by_redefining_just-162387

[2] <http://acsh.org/2016/01/3-reasons-campbell-soup-co-is-smart-for-using-gmo-labels/>

[3] <http://www.cast-science.org/>

[4] http://www.science20.com/search/apachesolr_search/nocebo

[5] <https://www.sciencenews.org/blog/food-thought/hormones-your-milk>

[6] <http://acsh.org/2015/10/counter-point-activists-operate-by-outrage-not-fear/>

[7] [http://www.cast-](http://www.cast-science.org/download.cfm?PublicationID=283819&File=1030ac46417e576660c87b6b2553352b6624TR)

[science.org/download.cfm?PublicationID=283819&File=1030ac46417e576660c87b6b2553352b6624TR](http://www.cast-science.org/download.cfm?PublicationID=283819&File=1030ac46417e576660c87b6b2553352b6624TR)