



Read Your Labels: Are Recent Nutritional Snapshots Helping – or Confusing?

Linda Bonvie

“Everybody wants to get into the act,” a catchphrase made famous back in the day by show business legend Jimmy Durante, seems to have found a new meaning. Apparently, everybody now wants to get into the act of helping the busy food shopper quickly determine what items are the “healthiest” ones to grab off the supermarket shelf.

But isn't this a good thing? After all, supermarket shopping can be an annoying, tedious chore that isn't exactly top on most people's list of fun things to do. But if you plan on eating the food taken home from such an expedition, it helps to know what's in it. And the only real way to acquire such knowledge is to read the ingredient label — something all of these health-conscious ‘helpful Hannahs’ seem to be steering you away from by calling your attention to superficial and often misleading criteria instead.

The latest player in this game of mock health marketing appears to be the technology and data company Vestcom out of Little Rock, Ark. Vestcom, which specializes in “shelf-edge solutions,” consisting of messaging and pricing information tags posted on store shelves, has now entered the nutrition advice arena with “healthyAisles,” which it describes as “nutrition info your customers can trust.”

The healthyAisles tag makes the same kinds of nebulous claims as do all those other quick nutrition guides. Its angle is to choose from a list of 35 “health and wellness” attributes such as “heart healthy” or “low sodium” to describe each product without offering much more in the way of informa-

tion as to what these processed foods actually contain. The system has already been sold to enough retailers to now appear in over 5,000 stores, according to the trade publication, Food-Navigator.com.

Just why another such ersatz health-and-nutrition merchandising system is needed isn't readily apparent. But Vestcom is holding firm to the concept that healthyAisles is “fact based,” “effective,” and a “national strategic partner with the United States Department of Agriculture's MyPlate,” although it doesn't exactly specify what that “strategic” partnership consists of. Perhaps the company's competitive edge is its appeal to older shoppers seeking a nostalgic connection to a time when buying food was considered strictly a woman's job, as evidenced by its tag line: “Give her the nutrition advice she seeks, precisely when and where she needs it.” Other consumer-confusing in-store “information” programs include:

- **Safeway's “SimpleNutrition” program**

SimpleNutrition is comprised of 22 “benefit messages” under “two groups of messages” that are supposed to meet “lifestyle, dietary” and “specific nutrition or ingredient criteria.” Could anything be simpler than that?

- **Publix Markets' “Nutrition Facts” tags**

Apparently not bothered that “nutrition facts” is the exact same term the government requires for processed food packaging information panels, Publix, a Southern supermarket institution, now features its own “Nutrition Facts” program that asks, “Who has time to analyze food labels? Luckily,

when you shop with us, you don't have to."

• **Stop & Shop's Healthy Ideas**

The creative naming of these programs is pretty much the biggest difference between them. Stop & Shop, for example, wants us to have "a simple way to know it's healthy": all you have to do is look for the Healthy Ideas shelf tag! Healthy Ideas tags are also on nearly all the fruits and vegetables in the produce department.

• **NuVal Scoring System**

This "nutrition made easy" program was purportedly "developed independently by a team of nutrition and medical experts." NuVal is another shelf-tag system that rates the "nutritiousness" of foods by scoring them from 1 to 100 using a patent-pending algorithm. But despite all the hoopla from NuVal, and its partner company Topco Associates, LLC, the system is a bizarrely flawed idea that rates sugar-free jelly higher than eggs.

• **Guiding Stars**

Described as "Nutritious choices made simple," Guiding Stars appears to be another variation on the theme, it uses a rating system featuring one to three big yellow stars — perhaps to appeal to those those who can't count to the higher NuVal numbers.

• **Supervalu Nutrition iQ**

Called "The better-for-you food finder" (which, by the way, is a pending trademark), nutrition iQ is a "shelf tag navigation program" that uses color coded tags below products to show which ones make the "healthy" grade. As Heidi Diller, Albertsons' registered dietitian, explains in a Youtube video, "reading labels is important, but that takes time. If only there was an easier way to shop healthy. Let our science guide you (to) better-for-you shopping." Unfortunately nutrition iQ omits more facts than it offers.

• **Facts Up Front from the Grocery Manufacturers Association**

Soon to be the focus of a big-bucks advertising campaign, Facts up Front features some tiny blue

boxes that will provide data on calories and three nutrients – but nothing, of course, about a product's ingredients.

• **Walmart's "Great for You"**

This front-of-package icon is designed to appear on food products that conform to the mega-retailer's standard of healthiness.

There are also a number of nutrition advice programs that have 'bit the dust', including:

- Smartspot, Pepsico's self-serving "more nutritious" designations on its own brands, which was launched in 2004 and canned in 2010;
- Sensible Solutions, a similar idea from the marketing gurus at Kraft, which made its debut in 2005 and was "put on hold" in 2009;
- Smart Choices, a promotion designed and paid for by the food industry that got bad press when its 'better-for-you' icon started appearing on Kellogg's Froot Loops packages. It came and went in 2009.

So there you have it, eight ways the food industry is helping us to shop.

If only it were that easy.

- *Linda Bonvie, FoodIdentityTheft Blogger and CFH Contributor*

<http://foodidentitytheft.com>

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