

Speech by Melanie Leech at the GDA Adopters Forum held on the 29th April 2010 at the Food and Drink Federation.

WHERE ARE WE NOW? POLICY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE UK

There's no denying that the debates here in the UK on front-of-pack labelling have been controversial – to say the least.

But after more than three years of intense debate, it could be argued that we have entered a calmer period, in which the strong rhetoric around traffic light labelling has died down considerably. We are now enjoying more constructive discussion and dialogue with Government and others on this issue. And all of that is in no small measure due to the combined lobbying efforts of industry and our ability to deliver a successful labelling scheme based on GDAs.

So it is worth taking stock – briefly – of what we have achieved.

From day one, we argued that labelling should not try to dictate food choices. Instead, it should be both objective, allowing consumers to interpret information in relation to their own requirements, and consistent with the concept of encouraging consumers to achieve a balanced diet within the context of their personal lifestyle.

We saw GDA labelling as an objective way of providing nutritional information and helping consumers construct a healthy, balanced diet through developing their nutritional knowledge. We strongly believe that when consumers make informed choices for themselves, through a high level of food literacy, they are more likely to stick with those good habits, rather than when someone 'tells' them to make such choices.

It wasn't easy trying to explain that philosophy – particularly when the traffic light rhetoric was at its strongest – but we do see this better understood, and increasingly accepted, among many key stakeholders.

Our latest trawl of the market suggests that more than 90 UK companies – retailers, caterers and manufacturers of all sizes – are now using GDA labelling on their packs. GDA labelling is the dominant scheme in market – appearing on as many as two-thirds of packs in some stores.

What's striking is how our leadership here in the UK has been replicated across Europe. GDA labelling has now emerged as the pre-eminent labelling scheme across all 27 EU Members States – you will now find this information carried on food and drink products sold in supermarkets as far apart as Warrington and Warsaw.

This is an unbelievable achievement for a voluntary industry initiative.

A raft of research – including that conducted by the Food Standards Agency – shows that the availability of products with GDA labelling is high; there's strong awareness of the scheme among consumers; and shoppers understand and are able to use the information available.

But while it is important to reflect on our collective successes to date, now is clearly not the time for complacency.

As all of you will be aware, in March the Food Standards Agency Board discussed its position on front-of-pack labelling and made some significant changes to its position as it sought to find a compromise and a way out of the big hole it dug for itself with its original – very confrontational - approach to this issue.

- The Agency now recognises the importance of providing information on a per portion basis, including calories.
- It now sees GDAs as being at the heart of any national voluntary labelling solution.
- And companies can choose whether to add text on top of GDAs or traffic lights or do both – colour coding is no longer positioned as a “mandatory” interpretive element of any scheme, although it wants all elements included over time.

Despite this apparent softening of the Agency's position – and the fact it was positioned as a victory for industry lobbying – we remain more cautious.

We argued that the Agency's research – no matter how robust – did not provide evidence to support the need to move towards a single scheme based on what we have dubbed a “triple hybrid” system.

But the Board decision means that the Agency has effectively adopted the concept of the “triple hybrid” as the best solution and it still wants a future single scheme to feature colour coding.

In what was quite a smart move, the Agency has now put the responsibility for the ultimate decision on the desk of incoming public health minister.

So tough discussions still remain – and it’s important that we maintain our strong, consistent industry voice at all levels of this debate in the months ahead.

Meanwhile, the EU institutions are negotiating the regulation that will ultimately govern the information all of us provide on packs in future. The proposed EU Food Information Regulation will have a massive impact on our industry – as Lisa will explain in a few moments – and we see one of our immediate priorities as working alongside CIAA to ensure the future regulatory framework for labelling is pragmatic and proportionate.

Back in the UK, the current state of play in the General Election clearly complicates things and makes it hard to predict what the immediate future may hold for all of us.

The Conservatives have made strong, positive noises about their support for a labelling system based on GDA information – and have committed not to goldplate the EU labelling regulation currently being negotiated in Brussels.

The Tories has also committed to taking nutrition policy away from the Food Standards Agency.

The Labour Party’s policies are well articulated, particularly in relation to obesity. And while its strong advocacy for traffic light labelling has cooled considerably in the past couple of years, the Party is still committed to the idea of having a single, simple front-of-pack labelling scheme in the UK.

And, of course, we have all started paying much more attention to the LibDem’s policies in this area – and while they have no clear-cut policies on specifics such as labelling, the Party’s health team recently signalled their support for the speedy introduction of the FSA’s triple hybrid system.

As we prepare for a new administration, how will FDF position itself? In the short term, we believe it is important keep stressing a number of key points:

- First, we believe that the FSA’s decision to promote a ‘triple hybrid’ scheme for front-of-pack labelling is premature given both the lack of hard evidence to support the need for a single scheme based on that approach and the implications of the forthcoming EU Food Information Regulation, which will have a massive impact on industry.
- Until that regulatory framework is agreed, we think Government should work with industry to encourage more consumers to use the information

already available to them – rather than try to create an optimum labelling system based on the subjective interpretations of a single piece of market research.

- Any single approach should take account of the current labelling landscape here in the UK, where GDA labelling is clearly the dominant scheme. This would appear to provide a sensible baseline for providing information for all

consumer channels – with companies free to add other nutritional evaluation systems as they see fit.

- We also believe there is an opportunity for Government and industry to work together to create a single approach to providing consumers with nutrition information. Calories per portion is an obvious starting point and if we succeed in making this the ‘new currency’ of nutritional information – which was the last Government’s ambition in tackling obesity – then we will start on the road towards achieving our common goal of improving the food literacy of UK consumers.

But as we look to life after May 06 our priority will be to ensure that the ongoing dialogue with the next Government remains constructive and that we work together to build on the work that we have all done to date.

The immediate future will be no less challenging – but I believe we are in far better shape than were in 2006 when the debate about labelling really began to hot up.