

More than just a label



By [Danette Breitenbach](#)

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The impact of public health rests on the ability of food labels to provide information to the consumer and for the consumer to interpret that information. Yet, most of us need a PhD to read a food label.



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Globally the food label is the most direct way of the buyer and seller communicating says Jane Badham, registered dietician and Nutritionist: JB Consultancy. Janusz Luterek, patent attorney at Hahn & Hahn Incorporated, adds that food labelling should be an important topic to brand owners and the first thing they should consider is the listing of food ingredients in South Africa.

Together with Megan Power, consumer columnist for *Sunday Times*, the trio made up the panel debating food labelling at the recent Consumer Goods Council of South Africa (CGCSA) Summit 2014 held at Vodaworld in Midrand.

Badham says a food label fulfils three main objectives:

- To provide basic product information to the consumer,
- to provide health, safety and nutritional information, and
- to act as a vehicle for food marketing and advertising.

Consumers are not using the label to make an informed decision, says Badham. "The food label might allow for, but it does not cause people to make better food choices. On their own, labels will not change the public health of South Africans. For that you need huge amounts of consumer education and behaviour change."

Power agrees, but makes the point that at least food labels are promoting some consumer education and consumers are asking questions. At the end of the day, labels are about brands doing the right thing. "Labels are about doing what is right and ethical, as well as building brand trust. "Brands must be honest and useful to the consumer through labels. It is about

transparency."

To a large degree brands have ignored the country's regulations when it comes to food labelling, says Luterek. He says brands need to consider the new regulations that will be implemented in May 2015, instead of looking for loopholes in the regulations.

The regulations affect firstly, any claim to a benefit on the brand name that has been used after May 1995 and secondly, if the name of the brand implies a health claim, then that claim cannot be used after May 2015 unless the product complies with the requirement of the regulations.

The regulations also want to limit the use of non-nutritional sweeteners and fructose and this can mean that Coke will not be able to use the word Light in its brand name. Can the DoH actually do this? Luterek says Section 15 of the FCD Act gives power to the Minister to make an objection in terms of the Regulations to stop deception or the misleading of consumers. "However, balanced against this is the Constitution and the rights it provides in terms of freedom of speech and freedom of choice. So in probability, it would be a case of using the trademark, but in a way that the regulation states. Also to be considered is the Consumer Protection Act (CPA), which prohibits the use of deceptive names in any case."

The bottom line, he says, is brands must provide consumers with the correct information on food labels, and consumers also need to understand what is on the label.

ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from Wits.

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