

Red meat labelling: What consumers want

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Food labels could be viewed as a source of potentially useful information to help consumers make good food choices. These labels draw attention to desired product characteristics and help consumers to avoid less desirable food items, ingredients and nutrients. Food labels also help consumers to compare similar products to make it easier to select the product best suited to their needs.

Meat product attributes

Table 1 indicates a wide range of product attributes that could potentially be communicated on red meat labels. While there are many options, it is critical to focus labelling claims on the aspects that are important to consumers in order to avoid information overload and consumer confusion.

Trust in red meat labelling

In 2016/17 the South African red meat industry funded a comprehensive consumer

study to investigate the red meat behaviour and perceptions of low-, middle- and high-income consumers in the Western Cape among a sample of 750 consumers. The sample reflected the income, ethnic and age groups of the population in the province. The Western Cape study followed a similar study conducted in Gauteng in 2012/13.

Middle-income consumers in the Western Cape revealed the highest levels of usage and trust in red meat labelling (Figure 1), with high levels of usage and trust applying to 35% and 26% of these consumers, respectively. Intermediate levels of usage and trust applied to 55% and 57% of these consumers, respectively.

High-income consumers followed middle-income consumers, with high levels of usage and trust applying to 20% and 15% of these consumers, respectively. Intermediate levels of usage and trust applied to 72% and 66% of these consumers, respectively. Thus,

compared to middle-income consumers, high-income consumers in the Western Cape relied more on other sources of information regarding red meat, such as social media, recipe books, television and butchers, than they did on food labels.

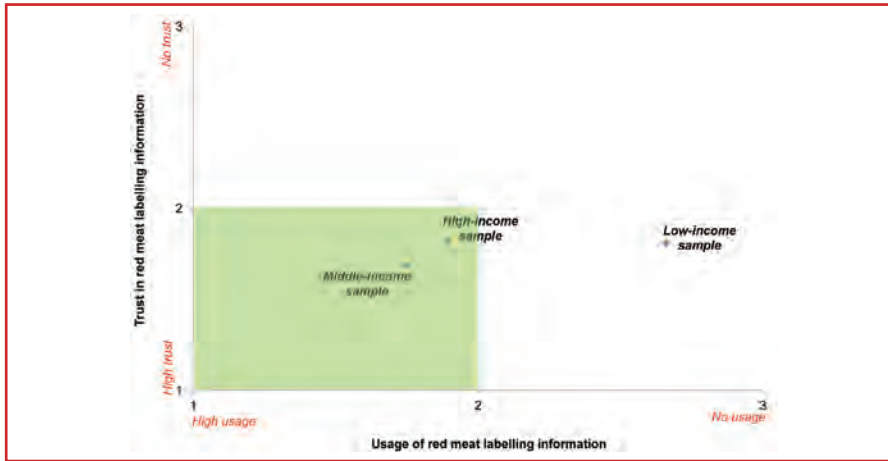
Usage of red meat labelling was substantially lower for low-income consumers (with 68% not using red meat labels as an information source at all). The level of trust was similar among low- and high-income consumers. The lower usage among low-income consumers could potentially be explained by the lower education levels of these consumers (e.g. 62% of the respondents left school before matric), as well as the possibility that these consumers face a more simplistic product offering if meat is purchased from less formal retail outlets.

It is also interesting to note that none of the socio-economic sub-samples demonstrated high levels of usage or trust in red meat labels as an information source, with average values closer to

Table 1: Product attribute categories. (Source: Oude Ophuis and Van Trijp, 1995)

Attribute category	Description	Specific attribute examples
Extrinsic product attributes	Attributes that are related to the product but that are not physically part of it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Price Brand name Manufacturer name Purchase location Origin of the meat Product guarantee Certification marks
Intrinsic product attributes	Attributes that are physically part of the product	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Type of meat cut (e.g. lamb rib chops) Size of meat cut (e.g. thick-cut rump steak) Type of meat (e.g. beef or lamb) Product composition (e.g. fat percentage in meat) Nutritional value
Experience product attributes	Attributes that can only be evaluated with certainty after consumption	Labelling pertaining to the taste, freshness, tenderness, juiciness, convenience and safety of meat
Credence product attributes	Attributes that cannot be evaluated with certainty by the consumer, even after consumption	Labelling pertaining to healthiness, naturalness, age of animal at time of slaughter, production practices (e.g. animal friendly, environmentally friendly, organic, free range, hormones and routine antibiotics used during production of animals), animal feeding practices (e.g. grain-fed or grass-fed beef), and to a certain degree, the safety and nutritional value of the meat product

Figure 1: Usage of and trust in red meat labelling among low-, middle- and high-income consumers in the Western Cape.



‘use sometimes’ and ‘trust somewhat’ among middle- and high-income consumers.

Reliable red meat information

Most Western Cape consumers (94,3%) perceived the reliability of red meat information as important, with no significant differences observed between socio-economic sub-groups. A possible implication could be that a higher level of trust in red meat labels could potentially be achieved through reliable red meat labelling practices. Reliable labelling is important for all types of product attributes (Table 1), but it is particularly critical for credence attributes.

In addition to consumers’ need for reliable information, the following legislation requires accurate red meat labelling:

- The *Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act, 1972* (Act 54 of 1972), specifically the regulations relating to the labelling and advertising of food.
- Section 24 of the *Consumer Protection Act, 68* (Act 68 of 2008), which stipulates that meat products (packaged, processed and dried) must contain certain prescribed information (e.g. quantity in packaging, name of the producer of the goods, ingredients – including species, mode of production and the country of origin).

The need for detailed information

Only approximately a third of low- and high-income consumers and just below half of middle-income consumers in the Western Cape, perceived detailed red meat labelling pertaining to the various product attributes

as very important. Approximately one fifth of the total sample dismissed detailed red meat labelling completely.

Low-income consumers mostly expressed basic red meat labelling needs, with the food safety and affordability attributes dominating their thinking in this regard. The most desired labelling claims were expiry date (mentioned by 53% of the sample), price per kilogram (42%), price per packet (40%) and sell-by date (23%).

Less than 10% of the low-income sample mentioned other aspects such as date of slaughter, recipe suggestions, packaging date, nutritional value, type of meat, fat content, additives, cost of meat in packaging excluding fat, preservatives, Halaal certification, meat origin and brand. Similar results were observed among low-income consumers in Gauteng. However, the group in Gauteng also expressed the need for a quality guarantee on red meat labels.

In addition to pricing information, food safety considerations were prominent among middle- and high-income consumers in the Western Cape with 98% of these consumers perceiving the provision of information on the sell-by and use-by dates of red meat as important. Among middle- and high-income consumers 75% or more of the sample perceived other labelling aspects such as meat classification, quality guarantee, fat content and nutritional content as important, with date of processing and slaughter date also more relevant to middle-income consumers.

Production method claims appealed to approximately 50 to 60% of these consumers, while meat origin claims (e.g. abattoir, feedlot, farm and area) appealed

to approximately 30 to 50% of the middle- and high-income consumers in the Western Cape.

In summary

Based on consumers’ desired red meat labelling aspects, it is recommended that the following information is included on red meat product labels:

- Pricing aspects: Price per kilogram, product weight in package and cost per packet.
- Food safety aspects: Sell-by and use-by dates, but slaughtering date and date of processing could also be included.
- Meat class.
- Nutritional information, including fat content.
- A general quality guarantee is also a desirable labelling aspect.

There is room for improvement in terms of the usage of and trust in labels as a source of information regarding red meat. Industry and retail outlets could do more to promote the usage of and trust in red meat labels as an information source, as customers do not utilise it to its full potential. Adequate traceability systems within supply chains contribute to the establishment of trust from a consumer perspective.

There is a need for education to enhance consumers’ understanding of the various labelling aspects, potentially enabling them to make more informed decisions, which translates into better customer satisfaction. ■

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