

## ABSTRACT

Consumer Interest Alliance Inc., 2007, *Readability of Food Product Labels*, Toronto.

The study was designed to assess the ease with which consumers could read the mandatory components of Canadian food labels. One hundred food labels were selected from supermarkets in two major cities or by internet purchase. The labels were evaluated in three different ways for ease of finding and ease of reading certain mandatory features.

A validated typographical scoring system, TVScore<sup>©</sup> (Metz 1996), was used to assess the readability of the lists of ingredients on all 100 labels. Of those labels, 7% of the ingredient lists were assessed as easy to read; 26% as difficult, and 67% as very difficult to read. In addition, three focus groups, each with 14 to 16 people, were held in different parts of the country. At these focus groups, well-educated consumers aged 50 plus, who were the major food purchasers for their household, examined and discussed approximately 40 of the labels. The focus groups found that most label design and typography was less than optimal and that finding and reading most of the mandatory information was a problem. At each focus group, a small number of each participated in a modified miscue analysis. Miscues and body language during these readings of selected label elements by the volunteer readers were noted.

The findings of the three processes demonstrated that the key elements influencing the ease of finding and of reading are: colour contrast (with poor colour contrast, other elements were secondary as text was not easily discerned), case, print style and size, line spacing, reverse print, justification, hyphenation, and surface type and print reproduction. Text organization involving long lines of print curving around a container, text blocks at right angles to each other, and separation of the nutrition facts table from the list of ingredients create problems for readers. Inadequate line spacing of text is a problem for readers of English text, but is worse for readers of French text as accents touch previous text lines. Text over illustrations, busy backgrounds or watermarks increase the reading difficulty. Mandatory information embedded in promotional information were difficult to find.

The “easy to find” and “easy to read” print presentation needs of one third of Canada’s population that are aged 50 plus are the same as for the general population. The research demonstrated the need for clear guidelines on the placement and the typography of mandatory food label components to ensure that they meet those needs. A number of recommendations to improve readability were developed.

The project was researched by Mary Alton Mackey PhD and Marilyn Metz PhD, and guided by the board of the Consumer Interest Alliance Inc. and the Volunteer Advisory Group of consumers from across the country with experience and expertise that was appropriate for the study.