

**Confusing Health Messages – Messages to consumers about
“nutritious” and “healthy” on packages and in advertisements for food
products in Sweden**

**Louise Ungerth, The Stockholm Consumer Cooperative Society and
Anita Laser, Reuterswård LaserNutriFood, Lund, Sweden**

louise.u@konsumentforeningenstockholm.se

ABSTRACT

The Swedish consumer of today is literally bombarded by different kind of messages and articles concerning the healthiness of food products – on packages and in advertisements, e.g. in magazines, daily newspapers and on television. The messages are transferred via nutrient declarations, different kind of symbols (e.g. the Swedish keyhole indicating low fat and/or high fibre), brands, pictures, texts and concepts. In Sweden, the term “functional food” is used as a message *per se*, in the marketing of some probiotic products and also for a yoghurt containing beta-glucans, mediating blood sugar. To know more about consumer perception of the healthiness of food, it should be useful to categorize and analyse different kinds of messages concerning “nutritious” and “healthy”.

A survey of texts on food packages and in some advertisements for about 300 items available on the Swedish market between 1998 and 2001 was performed (1). It was concluded that messages are transferred in many different ways:

- 1) Healthy messages woven into *brands and product names*, often in English, e.g.: Active, Advantage, I feel good, ProViva, Take Care, Wasa Vital.
- 2) Messages such as “*nutritious and healthy*” are quite frequently used; *nutritious* for juices, fibre-rich products (brans), probiotics and oat products, and *healthy* for margarines with *healthy* fat balance (containing omega-3 fatty acid or plant sterols), *healthy* lifestyle, *healthy* fibres, *healthy* foods such as oat products.
- 3) A product containing *olive oil* sends out a nutritious message just by labelling it *olive oil*. Another example is the usage of the word *ginseng* when put into bread or drinks – there is no need for any further explanation, people have received information elsewhere about the supposed health effects of ginseng.
- 4) *Balance* is used in texts in connection with messages about the body, the stomach (and its functioning), the gastro-intestinal flora, the diet, or about the balance between different nutrients (protein, fat and carbohydrates or different minerals).
- 5) A new concept, e.g. the word PLUS, is used in a positive way on many products, i.e. PLUS-products. It is a non-quantitative and unregulated term for the message that something *extra* (nutrients or substances) has been put into the product, which did not previously contain this material. The products are marked with a + or the words *extra* or *PLUS*.

6) Messages containing *highly esteemed words* are frequent, e.g. *lower, counteract, protect* and *stimulate*, as well as words used in other contexts, e.g. for vitamins; *loaded with, vital importance, valuable*.

7) The word *energy-rich* has for a few years had positive connotations instead of meaning too large an intake of calories. *Energy-rich* is sometimes used about calorie-rich products (positive message!) but also about *energy* from non-caloric substances as used in energy drinks.

8) Functional foods are often defined as products giving a specific physiological health effect (health benefit) beyond traditional nutrition, and the effect is supposed to be scientifically *documented*. On food packages and in advertisements, terms such as *proved, documented, doctoral thesis, research, study, science* and *University* are quite often used. Since 1990, the Swedish Food Industry, together with SNF Swedish Nutrition Foundation, has set up a voluntary Self-Regulating Programme concerning Health Claims in the Labelling and Marketing of Food Products. The programme was extended in September 2001 to include "product-specific physiological claims". By June 25, 2003, only two Swedish products had been scientifically evaluated and approved (2) (Primaliv youghurt with müsli and the margarine Becel pro.active). Virtually nothing is known about the consumer perception and credibility of the hp-info sign (2) used and the understanding of terms such as *documentation* already used in the marketing.

Consumers require credible information concerning nutritious and healthy products, in order to be able to choose and create meals which will benefit their health. It is of great interest to know what kind of messages, i.e. words and terms, are used, and which of them are within the regulations or are unregulated.

From a consumer point of view, there is a tricky balance between getting information in the form of health claims and messages and being misled.

References:

1. Laser Reuterswärd A, Ungerth L: "Nutritious" and "healthy". On different kinds of messages used for consumers. ("Nyttigt" och "hälsosamt". Om olika budskap till konsumenterna. In Swedish). Scandinavian Journal of Nutrition/Näringsforskning 2001;45:193-2001.
2. www.hp-info.nu/prodsp/granskad-dok.html