

# Nutrition, health claims perception differs by country - survey

By Stephen Daniells

6/13/2007 - **A consumer's perception of nutrition and health claims labeling differs not only between the US and Europe, but also among European countries, says a new survey from Unilever.**

The large-scale cross-national internet-based survey interviewed 6367 subjects in Italy, Germany, UK and US, and found that [consumer perceptions](#) of the claims varied across all the countries as a function of five claim types (content, structure-function, product, disease-risk reduction and marketing claim) and six health benefits (cardiovascular disease, stress, infections, fatigue, overweight and concentration).

*"This has important implications for nutritional education, in establishing the nutrient/ingredient-disease links, which is both a public health and a commercial stake,"* wrote Hans van Trijp from Wageningen University and Ivo van der Lans from [Unilever](#) Food and Health Research Institute.

*"For food companies an additional important consideration is that consumer perceptions of [health claims](#) differ between countries and that different benefits being claimed are perceived differently in different countries in terms of perceived newness and difficulty to understand.*

*"For marketing terms this means that global brands with health claims will have to invest different amounts of nutritional-communication support in different countries,"* they added.

The health and nutrition claims regulation entered into force in January. Although much of the detail still needs to be hammered out, some claims, such as those relating to children, will not be permitted as of July 1 pending approval at [EU](#) level.

The new legislation is intended to create a level playing field for claims made on foods throughout the EU, while at the same time ensuring that consumers are not misled.

Since science is increasingly recognised as a foundation for health and functional foods, a number of companies have expressed their approval that the legislation is to take effect. One outcome is that it will separate those companies with strong evidence to support their products from those making nebulous or unsubstantiated claims.

However some industry groups fear that it could be detrimental to the interests of small and medium enterprises, many of which are at the driving edge of innovation, since they do not have the resources to compile expensive dossiers.

The findings of the new survey, financed by Kraft Foods, Kellogg's, Unilever and Nestle and published in the journal *Appetite*, indicate that there are relevant differences in receptiveness between all of the countries studied, not only between Europe and the US.

For example, claims relating to stress were rated as the top-most difficult-to-understand nutrition and health claims in the UK and the US, but rated as relatively easy to understand, compared to taste claims, in Germany and Italy, said the researchers.

*"From a marketing point of view, pan-European strategies and policies should take this heterogeneity into account both in terms of product positioning and health education,"* wrote van Trijp and van der Lans.

And in general, van Trijp and van der Lans report that the product claim, without mentioning any ingredient, was more easily understood than for example the content claim, which was reported to be the least understandable.

*"The results have implications both for regulators, nutritional education and for food companies putting forward nutrition and health claims,"* they concluded.

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*"Consumer perceptions of nutrition and health claims"*  
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