



Call to Action to Standardize Food Date Labels Worldwide by 2020

CONFUSING DATE LABELS ARE A KEY CAUSE OF FOOD WASTE

In many countries, food products carry a range of date labels and it is often unclear whether a given date refers to food safety or food quality, and therefore whether a food can be eaten after the date.

Confusion over the meaning of date labels is estimated to cause up to 20 percent of consumer waste of safe, edible food by households in the United Kingdom, and is likely a contributing cause in other developed countries.

Standardizing food date labels and clearly communicating their meaning is a simple and effective way to reduce the amount of food thrown out by people, saving them money and reducing their environmental footprint since food waste is a contributor to climate change.

WHAT'S INCLUDED IN THE 'CALL TO ACTION'

The Consumer Goods Forum and Champions 12.3 call on retailers and manufacturers to commit to a three-part strategy by 2020, an approach that expands to the rest of the world national efforts already underway in the United Kingdom, United States, and Japan.

- **Two date label options:** Manufacturers and retailers should utilize only two types of written food date labels on packaging: one expiration date for perishable items (e.g. “Use by”) or one food quality indicator for non-perishable items (e.g., “Best if used by”). The exact wording will be tailored to regional context and what is most understandable for the consumer.

- **One date at a time:** Manufacturers and retailers should utilize at most one date label per food product.
- **Consumer education:** Retailers, manufacturers, government agencies, and/or nonprofits should educate consumers about the meaning of the date labels—for example through in-store displays, web materials, and public service announcements.

THE BENEFITS

This Call to Action has a number of anticipated benefits, including reducing food waste and therefore advancing Target 12.3 of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). More than 1 billion tons of food is lost or wasted each year, costing the global economy \$940 billion and emitting 8 percent of planet-warming greenhouse gases. SDG Target 12.3 addresses this challenge by calling on the world to halve food waste and reduce food loss by 2030.

The Call to Action benefits consumers. People waste money when they do not eat the food they purchase. The average household with children in the United Kingdom spends £700 a year on food that is thrown away—in the United States, that figure is \$1,500. Streamlined date labels and increased knowledge about what they mean will therefore help individuals and families.

The Call to Action benefits companies as well. It streamlines food date labeling for all companies, easing the burden on those operating in multiple jurisdictions especially. It also provides companies an opportunity to demonstrate leadership and action on behalf of consumers.

Based on input from several companies and industry associations that have already embarked on a transition to a “two-dates, one-date-at-a-time” food date label system, the following is a set of frequently asked questions and responses.

WHAT ABOUT LIABILITY? With the proposed standardization, no food safety labels (e.g., “USE by”) would be removed. Thus, the proposed standardization has no adverse impact. In some places, the proposed standardization actually may improve food safety since food quality (e.g., “BEST before”) labels sometimes currently appear on perishable items. Food retailer responsibilities would remain the same, but consistency in labeling would improve.

Regulations over date labeling understandably differ by location. In many cases, these regulations relate to specific products and what date they must bear. (For example, in the United Kingdom, eggs must be sold within 21 days of being laid, which is in turn 7 days before the Best Before date.) In many cases, though, these regulations apply to the date on the package, but not the phrase used. In examples like this, one may adhere to local regulation (avoiding liability in the process) while also applying the logic of a standardized date labeling strategy. For example, eggs in the United Kingdom could have a “USE by” (or locally equivalent) label for 28 days after laying, and retailers could use a bar code or other visual system to mark stock rotation, if necessary. Such an approach would give the consumer all necessary information, while also avoiding confusion and retailer/producer liability.

WHAT ARE THE STEPS A COMPANY TAKES TO STREAMLINE DATE LABELS? Depending on what is allowed by local regulations, a company may need to change the wording on printed labels and introduce printed bar codes for “display until” labeling. These changes imply adjustments in what is printed on packaging, but not new printing equipment. Retailers may need to train staff on how to access “display until” dates with scanners and how to explain the new labels to consumers when asked. Some companies may want to invest in outreach to educate consumers about the meaning and rationale for the standardized labeling. This could be undertaken in collaboration with other companies or stakeholders (e.g., UN- or NGO-led efforts).

WHAT DOES IT COST TO SHIFT? Businesses that have streamlined date labels have typically found the transition costs to be small. The costs are associated with reviewing existing food date labels and deciding which to change, changing the words printed on packaging, employee training, and consumer outreach. The actual date printed on a particular food item still follows the same protocol as before (i.e., the approach for deciding *which* label to put on a food item is not prescriptive about how the associated *date* is calculated). No new research on food safety needs to occur. Nonetheless, companies should review their products to decide on the appropriate type of label for each food item.

ARE THERE NATIONAL OR REGIONAL REGULATIONS THAT MAY NEED TO BE CHANGED? Rules, regulations, and guidelines regarding food date labeling are not harmonized across nations. In some countries, regulatory definitions are not clear. In other countries, only one type of date is allowed at all. And some countries take their cue from the Codex Alimentarius. For these reasons, the call for standardizing food date labels is timely and important. We are evaluating national regulations to identify in which countries date label standardization will be easier than others (so CGF company action in these countries can be prioritized), and in which engagement with agencies over time will be needed.

WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN UNION DOING WITH DATE LABELS? The European Commission has voiced support of a “two date options, one date at a time” strategy. It is currently assessing date labeling practices throughout Europe to identify streamlining opportunities. The Commission is also considering expanding the list of exempted food items (i.e., items not required to have any date label) as well as revising specific terminology of labels based on local consumer testing. The EU will complete its assessment of current practices by the end of 2017.

WHAT IS FMI/GMA DOING WITH DATE LABELS? In February 2017, the Food Marketing Institute (FMI) and the Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA) announced a national voluntary initiative to standardize date labels in the United States by mid-2018. After assessing current labeling practices, the groups carried out extensive consumer testing to determine the best language to use with the new strategy, and will use “BEST before” and “USE by” for quality and safety labels, respectively.

The Consumer Goods Forum is a global, parity-based industry network that is driven by its members to encourage the global adoption of practices and standards that serves the consumer goods industry worldwide. It brings together the CEOs and senior management of some 400 retailers, manufacturers, service providers, and other stakeholders across 70 countries, and it reflects the diversity of the industry in geography, size, product category and format. Its member companies have combined sales of EUR 3.5 trillion and directly employ nearly 10 million people, with a further 90 million related jobs estimated along the value chain. It is governed by its Board of Directors, which comprises more than 50 manufacturer and retailer CEOs.

LEARN MORE: www.theconsumergoodsforum.com

Champions 12.3 is a coalition of nearly 40 leaders across government, business and civil society dedicated to inspiring ambition, mobilizing action, and accelerating progress toward achieving Target 12.3 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

LEARN MORE: www.champions123.org

QUESTIONS? WE INVITE YOU TO CONTACT US TO LEARN MORE.

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