Consumer research study to identify new ways of expressing date marking that meet consumers’ information needs whilst minimising food waste

Consultation on date marking policy options of the EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste and of the Working Group on Food Information to Consumers Regulation

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Consortium core team

Cristiano Codagnone
Project Leader

George Gaskell
Scientific Advisor

Giuseppe A. Veltri
Scientific Advisor

Francesco Bogliacino
Experiment Expert

Frans Folkvord
Manager

Federico Puppo
Core Team Member

Lluïsa Fernández Giner
Fieldwork Leader

Fabio Babiloni
Neuroscience Expert
Agenda

1. Current status
2. Policy options
3. Closing and next steps
1. Current status
Main objectives of the project

Objectives

• To better understand how current date marking rules and their implementation affect consumers’ decisions to consume/use or discard foods

• To identify new ways of expressing date marking (e.g., in terms of terminology, format, visual presentation) that meet consumers’ information needs regarding food safety (health) and quality whilst minimizing food waste behaviour

• To test the effectiveness of these new ways of expressing date marking (vs. the current one) in preventing food waste linked to consumers’ misunderstanding of the meaning of these dates
Overall Approach

Task 1
Collection and analysis of existing evidence
- Review of evidence and inventory
- Stakeholder interviews
- Development of policy options

Task 2
Design and execution of behavioural research
- Online focus groups
- Online survey
- Laboratory/online experiment
- Additional VR lab experiment

Task 3
Integrated analysis of results and policy recommendations
- Preliminary plan for the quantitative results
- Overall analysis of results
- Triangulation of results
- Policy recommendations

REPORT 1
REPORT 2.1
REPORT 2.2
FINAL REPORT
Overall Approach

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**REPORTS**
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Task 1 - Collection and analysis of existing evidence

List of activities conducted

Sub-Tasks

- Literature review and desk research
- **Stakeholders in-depth interviews** (National authority [N=32], academica [N=5], European Organisation [N=8], Food Business Operator [N=7], NGO [N=4], SME [N=1], in total 57)
- Development of policy options

Objectives

- Collect evidence on consumer behaviour on food waste linked to date marking.
- Identify the policy options to be tested in the experimental phase.
- Gather information to fine-tune and establish the methodology for the next Tasks.
Task 2 - Design and execution of behavioural research

List of activities conducted

Sub-Tasks

- **Focus groups**

| Population | Frequent shoppers and/or responsible for meal preparation |
| Sample | Online: 12 participants per MS (2 sessions, each one with 6 members) |
| Duration | 120 minutes per FG |
| Methodology | Online focus groups |

- Balanced male/female
- 2 age groups (18-39; 40-65)
- Household composition (with/without children)
- 2 income levels (B and C1 / IPSOS grade classification)

Geographical coverage

Ten EU Member States (geographically balanced):

1. Romania
2. Greece
3. Lithuania
4. Poland
5. Spain
6. Slovakia
7. Hungary
8. Netherlands
9. Sweden
10. Ireland

Objectives

- Identify the main factors influencing consumer understanding, acceptance and use of date marking.
- Explore the consumers’ first reactions/impressions to the new set of policy options.
- Further develop alternative policy options for input to the next phases of the research
Principles of policy options for date marking

(1) **Increase salience** of information using, wherever possible, **simple graphic elements** (i.e., colour);

(2) **Text and graphic should be simple and clear**, people have been shown to think that ‘if it is hard to read then it is hard to do’ (Song & Schwarz 2008);

(3) Avoid any **complex numerical information**;

(4) Avoid as far as possible the **use of different formats** (across countries / industries / products), because they reduce familiarity and credibility.
Outcomes from the focus groups

Summary of key learning

1. General perception date labelling lacks consistency when it comes to size, format and location, being often hard to be found and/or properly understood.

2. Date marking is mainly used to assess the freshness of packaged perishable products and to give priority to what should be consumed first.

3. Checking dates tends to be considered more relevant for products that may become toxic, usually perishable products of animal origin (e.g. fish, chicken, milk), whereas it loses relevance for those products that may lose quality in their product attributes (texture, aroma, etc.) over time, but not become dangerous, which are usually dry products (cereals, coffee, spices, etc.)

4. For those consumers who understand the difference between the use by vs. the best before date, the best before date conveys a sort of “recommendation” or “advice” to consume the product up to the date, with no indication of what to do after that date, whereas the use by date connotes a sense of “warning” or “prohibition” not to consume the product after that date. Swedish and Irish consumers seem to be better educated on date labelling issues thanks to have been taught “Home Economics” at school.

5. Consumers who do not differentiate both types of date properly tend to consider both of them a sort of “generic expiry date” and they do not usually think there will ultimately be any relevant difference between both types of dates, meaning they will not affect their behaviour when faced with a product that is out of date, whatever date it might be.
6. **Type of product, food management experience and consumer profile** seem to be the variables that better explain consumers’ attitudes and behaviours regarding date marking.

7. **Four different consumers profiles** have been detected according to the relevance they attribute to date labelling, and their attitude and behaviour with respect to consuming products that are out of date: the Practical, the Rule-Abider, the Cautious and the Carefree.

8. **Sensory checking** (looking and smelling, plus touching or tasting, if appropriate) is the main strategy consumers develop to avoid waste when faced with food that may not be in good condition. On the other hand, they develop strategies to prolong the shelf life of products by freezing, cooking at high temperature, transforming or storing them properly.

9. Date marking is considered a way to **protect both consumers and companies** so that eventual **health** problems among consumers and **lawsuits** against companies are prevented. Consumers usually think that the expiry, use by and best before dates last longer than displayed on the packaging to “play it safe” and that this leads to **more food waste** than occurred before date marking existed.

10. Overconsumption and lack of smart shopping plan are considered the main reason that lead consumers to waste food. However, most participants try to **avoid wasting food for conscience or environmental or economic reasons**. The **older segment** (40-65 y.o.) seems more sensitive to food waste, although the younger segment (18-39 y.o.) is also developing some food waste awareness thanks to have been educated in sustainability-related issues.
2. Policy options
## Actual policy options

### Text based options

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Best before</th>
<th>Use by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01 Jan 2022</td>
<td>01 Jan 2022</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Best quality before</th>
<th>Do not consume after</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01 Jan 2022</td>
<td>01 Jan 2022</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usually good after</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01 Jan 2022</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Often good after</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01 Jan 2022</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Best before</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01 Jan 2022</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>then check look, smell, taste</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Actual policy options

Visual options

Use by
01 Jan 2022

Best before
01 Jan 2022

Use by
01 Jan 2022

Best before
01 Jan 2022

Best before
01 Jan 2022
Actual policy options

Visual options
Actual policy options

Visual options

USE BY: 01 Jan 2022

BEST BEFORE: 01 Jan 2022

Then check:
Actual policy options

Visual options

Use status quo labels, and add separate food waste label

i

Best before: 01 Jan 2022

REDUCE FOOD WASTE
Often good after this date

ii

Best before: 01 Jan 2022

Check before you bin it

iii

Best before: 01 Jan 2022

THIS PRODUCT IS OFTEN
FINE TO EAT AFTER THIS DATE
check look, smell, taste
Actual policy options

Visual options

1. Produced
   - 01 Jan 2022
   - 01 Feb 2022
   - Best before
   - Often good after. Check:

2. Produced
   - 01 Jan 2022
   - Check
   - Look, smell, taste

3. Produced
   - 01 Jan 2022
   - 01 Feb 2022
   - Use by
   - Do not eat after
Actual policy options

Currently used in the UK and other countries

Currently used in the UK

i. Past my date?
   Look, smell, taste
   Don’t waste

Currently used in the DK, DE, PT, AT, IT, PL and Switzerland

i. Often good after
   Look, smell, taste

Currently used in BE, ES, PT, FR

i. Before you throw me away
   Check my state
   Look, smell, taste
Actual policy options

Examples of date marking options on food products

Applications
Labels applied to products for illustrative purposes only
3. Closing and next steps
Closing and next steps

- Consultation EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste and the Working Group on Food Information to Consumers Regulation
- Develop survey and collect additional information
- Analyse the outcomes and prepare experimental designs
- Conduct (lab/online) experiments
- Triangulate the outcomes
Thank you