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inform with care



Communicating Food Sustainability to Consumers

Case Study: Foundation Earth



This case study is based on an interview with Cliona Howie, Chief Executive Director at Foundation Earth, along with publicly available information. The information in this case study does not necessarily reflect the views of UNEP, WWF or GlobeScan but aims to highlight and explain the approach of Foundation Earth in communicating food sustainability to consumers.

Foundation Earth is an independent, non-profit organisation established to harmonise a system for front-of-pack environmental scores on food products, enabling consumers to make more sustainable buying choices. The organisation was launched in 2021, bringing together expert scientists and leading figures from food production and retailing across the United Kingdom and the European Union. The company's headquarters are split between Spain and the United Kingdom.

Objectives

Foundation Earth's aim is to promote more sustainable buying choices by providing consumers with clear and credible information, in particular through its Eco Impact label, while aiding and encouraging food producers to innovate in a more sustainable way.

Approach

Scope and Visual Tools

Foundation Earth's pilot launched in late 2021 and uses a traffic-light style system and methodology, developed from research borne out of the University of Oxford. The method assesses a product's environmental impact by assessing the farming, processing, packaging and transport. The impacts are weighted 49% to carbon and 17% each for water usage, water pollution and biodiversity loss. After gathering information about the product, a life cycle assessment (LCA) is conducted to assign numbers to the impacts, for example the number of grams of CO₂ equivalent per 100g of product and per serving. This approach relies on individual product LCA data, rather than aggregated secondary data, making this methodology distinct from the methods behind other labels being developed.

Finally, an Eco Impact Score is awarded to be displayed using front-of-pack labels. To make it visually simple, a colour scale of green to red is used to rate products from 'A+' (lowest impact on the planet) to 'G' (highest impact).

This approach is designed to be user friendly and easy to recognise, on the basis that consumers often make their food purchase decisions in a matter of seconds, so anything aiming to influence this needs to be immediately intelligible to people and highly visual. In addition, a combination of colour and the letter was chosen to increase accessibility, for example to allow colour-blind consumers to understand it.

Channels and Layering of Information

The primary channel through which Foundation Earth will communicate to consumers is the Eco Impact label on product packaging or at point of sale.

Beyond this, for consumers looking for more details, [Foundation Earth's website](#) has a repository of rating and product information which can be reached by scanning a code on the back of the labelled-product or visiting the website directly and searching for that particular product. The website houses in-depth information on the impact information and certification parameters. The consumer can learn about the impact of the product at different life cycle stages from ingredients, processing and transport to packaging and retail.

Messaging

Foundation Earth's messaging aims to be transparent, evidence-based and simple. As an organisation, Foundation Earth believes that consumers have the right to access credible data about the impact of the food they purchase and consume. Foundation Earth is striving to create a harmonised, scientifically robust, credible and transparent communication stream to consumers on the life-cycle environmental impacts of products, which will accurately allow them to compare products in a given product category. Ensuring this information is as clear and simple as possible is part of the organisation's mission to educate people and raise understanding of the environmental impacts of food and to build consumer awareness of the power of their purchasing decisions.

Partnerships

Foundation Earth has received support from food producers, retailers, scientists and politicians. Marks & Spencer, Sainsbury's, Nestlé, Tyson Foods and Spanish supermarket Eroski are among the companies on the Foundation's industry advisory group, who help advise on the potential for environmental labelling on food products and support Foundation Earth's ambition to help build a more sustainable food industry. Many Foundation Earth members are also participating in pilots that support an intensive nine-month development programme to prepare for Europe-wide roll out of the 'Eco Impact' label in 2022.

More than 200 products currently carry the Eco Impact label across the EU, covering categories of meat, processed vegetables, milk, pulses, and cereals. Early adopters of the label include the companies Finnebrogue Artisan (whose late founder Denis Lynn founded Foundation Earth), Mash Direct, Mighty, Natco and Whites Speedicook Limited.

Measuring Success

As the pilot launched in late 2021, it is too early to assess the implications and customer uptake of the 'Eco Impact' label. Initial feedback reveals that a key takeaway for some consumers has been an impression of trust and appreciation to the brands for going through the process and being committed to transparency via an independent third party such as Foundation Earth, rather than detailed engagement with the specific score on a product.

Foundation Earth plans to conduct focus groups to test different tactics and approaches including both online and in-store and using this feedback to improve the rating label in the future. The organisation has set itself a milestone in Q3 of 2022 to produce substantial reports on the label, consumer reaction, number of products, diversity of products and other high-level learnings and trends.

Challenges

Creating awareness of the Eco Impact label and its objective is one of the biggest challenges for Foundation Earth. This is compounded by the proliferation of ecolabels on food products, which potentially compete for visibility. Bringing about consistency in the level of disclosure on the packaging itself is dependent on each company owning the product, and Foundation Earth is trying to standardise this aspect.

As the label expands to more markets across the globe, another big challenge may be the consistency and accuracy of the data behind the scoring of the label, because of the challenges in conducting and communicating life cycle assessments, while keeping its credibility intact. Foundation Earth recognises that there is a need to continuously learn from what consumers are saying and integrate it into a process that will help update the label to make it more relevant in the future across different markets and demographics.

Looking Ahead

Looking ahead, Foundation Earth is talking to consumer organisations and associations on consumer research and testing in addition to learning from big brands which conduct their own studies on consumer behaviour and patterns. This will help the organisation fine tune its Eco Impact labelling approach. Foundation Earth is also planning to increase social media presence since online buying has increased on the back of the pandemic. More presence on social media will also help to educate consumers on the Eco Impact label.

So far, the pace of uptake has been quicker than the organisation anticipated, in spite of environmental labelling being a voluntary exercise for companies today. Because of this, coupled with the global nature of many food supply chains, the organisation is also having conversations to expand outside the EU including South Africa, USA and Australia.