

Smart Choices Dynamite

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There's an urban legend involving an ice fisherman who decides to use dynamite to blast a hole in a frozen lake. There are many variations of this story (apparently none are true) but in the interest of my pet-loving friends, I'm going to recount the version that does not involve an exploding Labrador.

The fisherman decides the fastest and most efficient way to reach the fish on a frozen lake is with the help of dynamite. After a brief assessment of his throwing arm, the man lights a stick of dynamite and hurls it onto the frozen lake. The man, however, forgets about his canine friend, who was evidently up for a game of fetch that day. Immediately, the dog takes off after the dynamite, rushing back towards the man's brand new pick up truck. The frantic fisherman starts shooting buckshot into the air in an attempt to stop the dog, but the terrified animal drops the dynamite in the bed of the truck and takes off for the woods. Instead of an easy day of fishing, the man watches helplessly as his brand new vehicle explodes into pieces and sinks to the bottom of the lake.

I thought of this story the other day, when I read about how the recently launched Smart Choices labeling initiative is being voluntarily halted due to FDA concern and impending crackdown on misleading labels.

In theory, the Smart Choices program was a great idea. It was intended to create a single and uniform front-of-package labeling system that would help consumers identify smarter food choices, at-a-glance. It was based on nutritional criteria from credible sources such as the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the Institute of Medicine.

However, the leniency of the program seems to have contributed to the plan blowing up in the face of its backers. Despite pages of published qualifying nutritional criteria, products such as Fruit Loops and Fudgsicles somehow made the cut. More specifically, they bear the label because they do not exceed the decided upon healthy levels of "nutrients to limit" (such as total fat, trans fat, sodium) and they include one or more "nutrients to encourage" or provide at least one-half serving from one "food group to encourage."

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Even if there was nutritional merit behind labeling Fruit Loops a "Smart Choice," the sugar-laden product threw up red flags for consumers, media outlets and even FDA officials, leading to further criticism of the Smart Choices program. What was quickly pointed out was the fact that the program was heavily funded by major food manufacturers (such as Kellogg, Kraft and Unilever), causing most everyone to question the bias and credibility of the initiative. It is reported that major corporations contributed a combined 1.47 million to fund the development of the program, enough money to possibly sway labeling decisions and absolutely stir up skepticism with consumers.

All things considered, I think the initiative has merit and is a step in the right direction towards a sorely needed uniform system of nutritional labeling. Wealthy food giants were a logical place to look for funding, but perhaps the initiators of the program needed to better think through the consequences of that decision. The financial backing by those with a vested interest in bearing Smart Choices labels overshadows all academic research that was done to secure the accuracy of the program. And now, with the program on hold by order of the FDA, food manufacturers are left helplessly watching their \$1.47 million sink to the bottom of the lake.

What do you think of Smart Choices labeling? Drop me a line at karen.langhauser@advantagemedia.com [1].

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