Knowing the Cost:

Advocating Consumer Awareness in a College Environment

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ABSTRACT

The need for informed consumers grows bigger and bigger each year as the negative impacts of many products becomes harder to see, and even more so to feel or quantify. This program aims to seed the creation of an informed consumer body within the UNC Chapel Hill area. We will to do so by implementing a new and improved system of product labels across the UNC-CH campus as well as running an aggressive awareness campaign. Our program differentiates itself from other labeling programs in one large way: this campaign doesn't wish to make consumer decisions for them. We advocate nothing but awareness. Where other labeling and awareness campaigns push to influence consumer decisions in a specific direction (toward environmentally-minded consumerism or health-minded consumerism, for example), this campaign asks informed consumers to make those decisions for themselves. We only advocate that the consumer takes responsibility for the purchasing decisions he/she makes.

INTRODUCTION

As the global consequences of unchecked commercialism are on the rise, so too is the need for an informed body of consumers. Gone are the days when the negative impacts of certain products were felt instantly and locally. In today's world, health consequences can be hidden for years (think of the decades it took for cigarettes to be named as major health hazard), and ethical crises can lurk behind national borders, unseen to the developed consumer's world.

In the past, efforts to inform consumers have been quickly tied up in political controversy and other biases. The initial release of the USDA's food pyramid reflected heavy grain industry influence, and encouraged consumers to eat far more carbohydrates than was actually healthy (Nestle, 2011). Many of the environmental movements of the 1970s were forced to a standstill when accusations of elitism and deceit flooded their organizations. As a result, the ever-growing body of consumers that ought to be informed is pressured by their politics and reputations to remain ill informed (Lemann, 2013). A person cannot make ethical consumer decisions without being named an environmentalist, with all the label's negative connotations. A person cannot make decisions based on nutritional or health reasons without being named a "health nut."

Our proposal is simple: take away the judgment of informed consumerism in order to allow individuals to make personal decisions concerning the products they will or will not buy. Our goal isn't to influence, but to inform; we don't strive to change their mind about any issues, and have no hidden agenda. We simply ask that the consumer understand the effects of their purchase, and make such decisions in good conscience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Informed consumerism can be divided into two broad categories: health-driven and ethically driven. The more complicated of the two is ethical consumerism: the practice of making consumer choices based on social or environmental concerns regarding the product. Every year, more and more consumers around the globe voice desires for more sustainable and responsible product lines. However, as Carrington et al. pointed out in their 2010 study, there is a large gap between consumer behavior versus their voiced intentions. People forget about ethical consumerism once they have entered a store.

In combating this "intention-behavior" gap, the best strategy by far has been to implement clear labeling of fair trade/ethical products, which can serve as a reminder to consumers who are looking to minimize their impact (Carrington et al., 2010). Labels also help to bridge the intention-behavior gap by giving a reason for the often-elevated price of ethical products (Carrington et al., 2010). Many consumers shop for products by looking for the cheapest variety on the shelf; a label can help draw the consumer's eye back to a particular product by saying "this product is more expensive because its producer has ensured that the product's production has been sustainable/ethical/etc."

As such, many NGOs and nonprofit organizations have started campaigns to label ethical products: among those include Fair Trade, the Rainforest Alliance, Energy Star, etc. This trend raises its own share of problems: with the growing number of ethical labels, consumers are beginning to report confusion as to which labels are legitimate (Valor, 2008). As an example, consider confusing wording over the difference between "free range" and "cage free" chickens. "Cage free" simply means that the chickens are not confined in overcrowded cages, but often they are still living in horrifically overcrowded conditions on the bottom of a warehouse floor. "Free range," though its connotation is slightly better, still only guarantees that the chickens have *access* to an outdoor enclosure. Often their access is severely restricted and relatively few chickens manage to squeeze through the pack of chickens in the warehouse to even make it to the similarly overcrowded pen. Neither label truly indicates that chickens were raised as the ethical consumer might think; neither label guarantees that the chickens were raised in under-crowded, outdoor conditions.

Knowing the ingredients of purchased products can go a long way, even if ethical consumerism is not on the forefront of the consumer's mind. Many studies have shown that simply reading the ingredient labels of food products before purchase will improve the consumer's diet. A 2011 study by Ollberding et al. showed that reading food labels resulted in significant improvements in dietary intake when compared against non-label readers. Specifically, daily fat intake was significantly reduced when the consumer read the ingredient label of the food product they were about to purchase (Ollberding et al., 2011). A 2013 study by Kang et al. showed similar results in Korean adults: reading nutrition labels resulted in a decreased instance of metabolic syndrome (MetS) within the study participants. Widely publicized studies in university dining halls, such as the 2008 study by Driskell et al., show that many students are likely to change their food choices after reading posted nutrition information at the various stations.

The bottom line: consumers are eager and willing to make informed decisions about the products they purchase or consume. The largest barrier to making those decisions lies in accessibility of consumer information. Clear, targeted, and reliable labeling schemes are easily the best-proven way to provide helpful information to the consumer.

PROJECT NARRATIVE

**Statement of the Problem**:

In today's world, the need for informed consumerism is widespread and well documented. Many consumers are willing and able to reform their consumption of some of these harmful products, but are simply unaware of the issues surrounding the products they purchase. Awareness alone cannot solve many of these issues, but the first step to solving any problem is making the public aware that the problem exists in the first place. We aim to do so by implementing our PSA and labeling system.

**Goals and Expected Outcomes**:

At the end of this program, we aim to create the beginnings of an informed consumer body within the UNC-CH area. Through awareness campaigns and a new, more consistent and thorough system of labeling on campus, much of the judgment and uncertainty that comes with informed consumerism will be removed. This will leave consumers with an easy way to assume responsibility for their purchases. If they purchase a product with health or ethical concerns attached to it, they do so with full knowledge of their actions. Over time, we hope this easy access to information will decrease the student body's consumption of unhealthy or otherwise dangerous products as well as allow students to avoid purchasing products they have a moral concern with. In the end, however, these decisions are the consumer's to make. We aim to differentiate ourselves from other similar labeling campaigns by advocating awareness without pushing an agenda. If a consumer actively wishes to consume high-fat products made in sweatshops by one-armed orangutans, then it isn't this program's aim to prevent them. We only advocate that the consumer be aware of the implications of such a purchase.

**Methodology and Procedure**:

All programming will be tailored to addressing five main concerns associated with products: environmental, animal welfare, carcinogens/disease-causing agents, nutrition concerns, and working standards/exploitation. These categories are based on the five areas where most research concerning consumer impacts is focused. At all times, a "Knowing the Cost" website will be accessible to the student body, where students may submit comments regarding the accuracy and thoroughness of the campaigns. The principle investigators will address comments personally, as the accuracy of this campaign is vital to its success.

To create an informed consumer body at UNC-CH, we plan to implement a three-pronged approach aimed at targeting each step of the consumer's day: at home, at school, and at the point of purchase.

1. To reach consumers at home, a 30-second consumer awareness PSA will run on a prime time local news channel. The PSA will simply bring consumer awareness to the forefront of the consumer's mind and ready them for the next step of the program, to be encountered on UNC's campus.
2. On campus, this program will run an outreach campaign, manned by students, to talk individually to students in the Pit. During the outreach campaign, student workers will pass out brochures that itemize the reasons why an informed consumer body is important, and tailor the discussion to the concerns the consumer finds the most interest/personal stake in. (The content of the brochures will be customized to the consumer's interests. More details will be provided in the budget justification section.) Additionally, posters advocating informed consumerism will be hung in particularly high-traffic buildings on campus, such as the Union and Undergraduate Library.
3. Our program will reach students at the point of purchase by implementing a campus-wide labeling campaign. The new labeling system will complement the few existing systems (such as nutrient information found in the dining halls) and will establish an information base in areas of campus that have had none before. In short, labels based on the five areas of focus (names above) will be placed beside the display of all food products being sold on campus. When a student removes a product from the shelf, they (at the very least) notice the label and (ideally) take its information into account before purchasing the product.

PERSONNEL

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| **Personnel/Staff** | **Quantity** | **Skills Description** |
| Principle Investigators | 2 | The personal investigators, who have the most thorough knowledge of the project and its needs, will complete most of the administrative and logistic work.  Skills needed:   * Access to email and other electronic forms of communication * Excellent communication and logistical skills * Contacts within Carolina Dining Service and Carolina Union Activities Board in order to expedite permissions * Ability to communicate project goals to interested parties (especially during the outreach campaign)   No compensation; Positions already staffed. |
| Student staff | 3 | Student staff will be used to run the booth in the Pit during the outreach campaign.  Skills needed:   * Ability to communicate the need for consumer awareness to the student body during the outreach campaign * Ability to maintain a neat and orderly appearance of the Pit booth * Punctuality and responsiveness to directions from the Principle Investigators   $35.00 compensation per session; Positions already staffed. |

**Personal statement:**

The Principle Investigators named here are solely qualified to execute and complete this awareness campaign because of our status as students at UNC-CH. This campaign is coming from the student body to the student body, and we do not presume to tell other students what they can and cannot purchase. We simply advocate awareness. In addition, we both have experience with interpretative education: Ms. Kravets spent 6 years working as an advocate for consumer awareness through the Audubon Zoo's Education Department, and Ms. House spent 3 years at the Durham Children's Museum doing similar work. As such, we both can expertly communicate to other students the importance of an informed consumer body. Ms. House has contacts within Carolina Dining Services that have already approved the implementation of the labeling campaign and are eager to see the program move forward on campus. Ms. Kravets and Ms. House both have extensive background in design and layout, making them ideal candidates to create the brochures, labels, and posters so integral to the program's success.

BUDGET/BUDGET JUSTIFICATION

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| **Program Expenses** | **Quantity** | **Total Cost** |
| Product Labels1 | 3000 | $ 240.81 |
| Brochures2 | 5000 | $ 422.49 |
| Posters3 | 10 | $ 219.99 |
| TV Advertisement4 | 2 | $ 1,000.00 |
| Personnel5 | 3 | $ 105.00 |
|  | **Total Expenditure:** | **$ 1,988.29** |

1Product labels will be bulk ordered, to be placed as a complement to existing nutrition labels on vending machines, as well as to be placed near items of interest in Ram's Head Market and the Blue Ram Market and the two dining hall locations. Bulk order price based off of five labels citing different concerns: environmental, animal welfare, carcinogens/disease causing agents, nutrition concerns, and working standards/exploitation.

Quantities listed here are based off of the five label categories and 600 individual   
 labels per category. These labels can be stored long-term and will allow for new

products to be labeled appropriately as they come into stock at the dining  
 locations. These labels are vinyl based and will be resistant to wear.

*(Prices quoted from uprinting.com)*

2Brochures will be utilized during the outreach campaign, and will be passed out to students cross through the Pit during the campaign days. These brochures will outline many of the concerns facing consumer awareness, and be customized based on the five label categories names above (environmental, animal welfare, carcinogens/disease causing agents, nutrition concerns, and working standards/exploitation). Customizing brochures based on individual categories will prevent students from becoming overwhelmed by the amount of information on the subject; each student will be able to select brochure(s) based on their own personal interest.

Quantities listed here are based off of the five categories and 1000 brochures   
 focusing on each individual category. Brochures will be full color and made from   
 aqueous 100lb paper.

*(Prices quoted from staples.com)*

3Informative posters will be hung in high-traffic areas of the core of campus (such as the Undergraduate Library, the Student Union, Bottom of Lenoir). These posters will remain hanging long-term, so that students who missed the initial ad and brochure campaign can still have access to information about campus consumer awareness. Posters will all contain visual variations on the same consumer awareness theme and direct students to interpret the consumer labels (previously noted) that will be spread around campus.

Posters will measure 24" x 36"and will be full color.

*(Prices quotes from staples.com)*

4To further spread the PSA, two prime-time airings will be purchased on a local news channel. Exact cost will vary based on airing time, but $1000.00 will be budgeted regardless. If each run of the advertisement costs less than $500.00, then additional airings will be purchased.

5Personnel compensation will be given to the three students asked to staff the booth in the Pit during the outreach campaign. Each student will receive $35.00 for staffing the booth.

TIMEFRAME

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| **Year** | **Month** | **Events** |
| **2014** | March | * Labels go out on products in specified dining locations. Posters are hung in high-traffic areas of campus. * Principle Investigators start spreading word of the campaign by word-of-mouth. * Campus survey will be sent out to the student body to determine its initial opinions regarding consumer awareness |
| April | \*\* |
| May | Maymester/Summer Break — No campaign scheduled, but labels will continue to inform summer students. |
| June |
| July |
| August | TV advertisements run |
| September | First outreach campaign   * First student hired to staff Pit booth. * Principle Investigators also present during outreach event to aid the student staff in talking to the student body. |
| October | \* |
| November | Second outreach campaign |
| December | \* |
| **2015** | January | Third (Final) outreach campaign |
| February | \* |
| March | [If Possible] Additional outreach campaign using any leftover brochures.  In this month, decisions will be made regarding the future of the program.   * Additional grant money may be applied to in order to repeat a similar program for the remainder of 2015/2016. * Campus surveys will be sent out to evaluate the program's effect on the student body's opinion regarding consumer awareness. * Survey results will be compared to Carolina Dining Service data to determine the effectiveness of the program on altering actual purchasing behavior on campus. |

\*Rest month. No outreach campaign will be held during this period of time in order to not browbeat or otherwise irritate student body with the program's campaign.

\*\*April, due to its proximity to the end of the semester, was deemed inappropriate for any aggressive outreach campaigning.

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