

25 July 2012



It is the time of the signs that make no sense and of labels that beggar belief. A packet of Turkish delight sports the announcement: “60% less fat – and always has been”. A packet of biscuits proudly announces: “Still using our original 1897 recipe – now new and improved”.

What does it all mean? What are we looking for in our food labels? Are we looking for truth? Do we want the truth? Is truth in labelling going to diminish our enjoyment of the food? The National Heart Foundation in Australia sells companies the right to display their ‘heart health’ tick on foods that are ‘good for heart health’. But the tick seems to apply only to fat content, because many of the ticked foods are very high in salt and/or sugar.

Research has shown that cocoa contains potent antioxidants and, therefore, presumably, cocoa is good for our health. Some chocolate manufacturers have used this to advertise their milk chocolate as being good for us because it contains cocoa. But how much cocoa is there in milk chocolate? Companies making instant coffee similarly use research about the antioxidants in green coffee beans as the basis for claiming health benefits for their instant coffee. Those products bear little resemblance to green coffee beans, after roasting and chemical processing.

In the shops we have a bewildering array of milk, with varying fat content, homogenised and non-homogenised, A2 and A1, organic and non-organic. Much of the cheapest milk is also ‘watered down’ with permeate, but labels do not mention this.

In Australia we can buy bottles of “organic” water and water that boasts it is “100% fat-free”. I don’t know what that means. I wonder if the ‘manufacturers’ of the water have any idea what they mean.

A shop in a nearby suburb advertises: “Antique Furniture Made to Order”. I am not averse to accepting that the meanings of words change over time, but I am not aware of the meaning of ‘antique’ changing to such an extent in common parlance. A fruit shop in the heart of Melbourne’s suburbs boasts: “only local produce sold here”. As the shop is at least thirty kilometres from the nearest orchard or market garden, I was intrigued. When I asked the owner about his claim, he told me that he was assured by all his suppliers that the produce was picked only by people who live close to the orchard or market garden and, therefore, there was less travel involved; and the rest of his produce came from the ‘local’ wholesale market – where it was actually grown was not known by him.

Along with ‘organic’, many words are being used dishonestly or, at least, with no relevance to their subject: ‘green’, ‘environmental’, ‘recycled’, ‘climate-friendly’, ‘eco-friendly’, ‘natural’. A packet of almonds in a cardboard box had the word ‘Organic’ prominently printed on it. After I bought it, I read the box to learn that the almonds were not grown organically (i.e. without chemicals, etc.) but the plantation timber used to make the cardboard for the box was. A notebook I bought some time ago had the word ‘Recycled’ printed boldly on the cover. When I looked at it more closely (very closely), I was just able to decipher the tiny writing above the word ‘Recycled’: “after use, this product may be ...”.

I have many times been brought close to shop-rage when, late at night, I headed for an illuminated sign promising good coffee, only to find the café closed. I have also been in the situation of taking an item to the checkout in a store, the window of which announced: “Everything reduced – store-wide sale”, to be told that the sale only applied to ‘sale items’. I looked around for something to hit after arguing with the shop assistant. I thought better of it when I saw the size of the store security person and I slunk off to a café nearby, which offered “the best coffee you’ll ever drink”. I don’t know if it was, as I was beyond caring.

Signs can also stop you in your tracks. Arriving at a T intersection down a narrow road, I was faced with a “no right turn” sign and a “road closed” sign on the left. What to do? More to the point, who planned this affront to logic? And why no sign at the start of the narrow road warning that it would lead nowhere?

In this information age, why is it so difficult to obtain accurate and timely information? It is not only errant signs that are a problem. Writers in medical journals and newspapers have a lot to answer for, as do their editors and sub-editors. They frequently quote results that are not supported by the data they present or, as in a recent article in *The Age*, write that 627,800 is 0.1% of 282 million. Is it laziness, fraud, lack of education or just a sign of the times?