

Pantry clean out impacts food waste

Sustainability guru Keith Chessell says the road to food waste is often paved with good intentions, arising from confusion caused by the use by and best before dates.

RECEIVED this email last weekend from one of my church leaders: “Folks, just to give you plenty of notice, on Sunday afternoon the 3rd of February, I’ll be gently undertaking my annual purge of things out of date in the church fridge and cupboards. Anything that’s out of date will be disposed of (humanely of course). Note that this year the purge will include stuff in the freezer that’s beyond the relevant ‘freezer period’.

How do you respond to that? “It’s about time someone cleaned out the cupboards” or “I better get down and rescue those food items that are still OK.”

Well, I’m sure you’ve got someone in your office, sporting or community group or even in your home that undertakes what they would consider a safety audit of food products each year. Having worked in the food and beverage industry for many years I’m well aware that these food vigilantes have good intentions, but those good intentions dispose of a number of edible products.

EXPIRY CONUNDRUM

The confusion in the understanding of ‘use by’ and ‘best before’ dates isn’t just an Aussie thing, it’s recognised globally in developed countries as a large food waste issue. The EU Commission data estimated that a considerable share of household food waste (15 to 33 per cent, depending on the studies) could be linked to date marking due, among other factors, to consumer misunderstanding of the meaning of these dates.

The USA NRDC studies shows that more than 80 per cent of Americans misinterpret date labels and often throw food away prematurely, under the misconception that it’s necessary to protect their families’ health.

Australia, unfortunately, has little specific food waste data as a result of food expiration dates. Both these regions/countries have similar date labelling laws as Australia, so it’s reasonable to indicate that we also have a significant food waste issue resulting from confusion over ‘Use By’ and ‘Best Before’ dates. This has certainly been confirmed by industry discussion and investigations.

The confusion over these two terms isn’t confined to households, as retailers and food service handling of the expiration date information also unnecessarily disposes of edible food products.

So how can we remove this confusion that leads to a significant quantity of edible food product being thrown away each year? First, we need to understand the terminologies.

FOOD STANDARDS

Food Standards Australia & New Zealand (FSANZ) information indicates that date marks give a guide to how long food can be kept before it begins to deteriorate or may become unsafe to eat. The two types of date markings are Use By dates and Best Before dates, and the food supplier is responsible for placing these on food.

1. USE BY DATES

Foods that must be eaten before a certain time for health or safety reasons should be marked with a use by date. Foods should not be eaten after the use by date and cannot legally be sold after this date because they may pose a health or safety risk.

2. BEST BEFORE DATES

Most foods have a best before date. This means you can still eat foods for a while after the best before date, as they should be safe, but they may have lost some quality. Foods that have a best before date can legally be sold after that date provided the food is fit for human consumption.

These two FSANZ definitions highlight a number of areas that require further in-



vestigation, research studies and industry discussion, if we are to address the food waste challenge.

There is no uniform or universally accepted system used for food dating by food manufactures in Australia. Therefore, research needs to be undertaken to understand the rules or assumption and testing that food manufacturers use to select either Use By or Best Before and then the basis for nominating the expiry dates.

SAFETY FIRST

Food safety is certainly the critical concern for food manufacturers in setting the ‘Use By’ date. Market research is required to understand the safety factors that food manufacturers have established, to ensure there is no risk in product being eaten after that date which could cause a health issue.

In recent times, food manufactures have commenced using another expiry date statement for short shelf life products: “Best consumed within 4-5 days after opening”, which from a consumer viewpoint overrides the Use By date.

My experience is that in normal refrigerated conditions this additional date statement carries at least another seven-day safety buffer to ensure protection from any poor handling or storage conditions. Is the

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consumer aware of this additional statement and has this led to further product being unnecessarily thrown away?

BEST BEFORE

In the case of Best Before dates, there is a different approach by food manufacturers that can lead to significant amounts of edible food becoming food waste. The focus and priority is to protect their brand image, so the Best Before date is set to ensure the consumer will always consume the product at its best quality. This may in the case of some products be extended to meet retailers' stock control requirements. Logically the food manufacturer is not really concerned from a brand perspective if the consumer disposes of an out-of-date product, as this will lead to additional sales. Why is there consumer confusion over expiry dates that leads to food being unnecessarily thrown away? Are the

terms too similar in meaning? Would different wording like Best By reduce consumer's confusion?

Are there some additional foods (non-perishable) in the marketplace, which could be exempted from the requirement of the Best Before date?

In addressing the food waste challenges arising from the confusion over expiry dates the Australian Institute of Packaging (AIP) has recognised that changing these FSANZ definitions will be very difficult. The AIP's suggested approach to this food waste issue in their project activity as part of the current Fight Food Waste Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) will be to:

- Quantify the actual waste information that is occurring in Australia due to this expiry date confusion.
- Collaborate with key industry bodies to bring together all stakeholders to find a solution to address the food waste con-

cerns and confusion around Best Before and Use By dates.

- Work with state and community sustainability groups to provide educational resources for consumers on these food expiry date definitions.

In the REDUCE component of the Fight Food Waste CRC, the AIP is developing Design Criteria to assist packaging companies, manufacturers, distributors, retailers and the food service sector. The Design Criteria will provide industry with the tools required to help reassess current packaging formats and provide guidance as to the innovation required in the development of new packaging formats.

Other Food Waste activities in which the AIP has been leading the packaging focus in Australia over the last four years include running the Packaging Industry Save Food Design Awards as part of the overall Packaging Innovation and Design Awards (PIDA) program; and conducting a series of training courses covering 'The Role of Packaging in Reducing Food Waste'. During 2018 the AIP also played an active role in establishing the National Food Waste strategy goal of reducing food waste by 50 per cent by 2030.

If you or your company have an interest in participating with the AIP in the Fight Food Waste CRC Reduce project activity, contact Nerida Kelton at the AIP for further information (e: nerida@aipack.com.au.) ■

ABOUT THE WRITER:



Keith Chessell (FAIP) has close on 50 years' experience working with food and beverage brands on packaging solutions. His work focuses on innovation and new product development, and he consults widely on sustainable packaging design. Keith has been awarded a 2019 WPO Lifetime Achievement award (see page 6 and page 18).



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