

Transparency key in decision to label modified ingredients, study says

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Take a look at any food label and there's a good chance all design elements, from the color palette to the smallest detail, were meticulously chosen.

Now, amid public debate about whether food companies should list genetically modified (GM) ingredients on their labels, that same deliberative process may be crucial to the perceived legitimacy surrounding controversial decisions. A Cornell University study found consumers are more supportive of labeling decisions when they believe the [company](#) considered the public's input in the process.

The study bolsters longstanding research into the impact of perceived fairness and transparency surrounding any [decision](#)-making process, known as procedural justice. For the first time, Cornell researchers investigated how the theory relates to the contentious issue of GM labeling, with implications for how companies reach their decisions and communicate them to the public.

For the study, researchers asked 450 participants to read one of four fictitious news articles detailing an agro-food company's decision about labeling the GM content of their food products. The mock articles varied on four key points: the decision whether or not to label the presence of ingredients grown from GM seeds, and whether or not the company considered the public's input as part of their deliberations. Participants then gave their reactions on a six-point scale regarding the legitimacy of the process and whether they support the company's decision.

Researchers found a significantly more positive reaction to a decision—regardless of whether it was to label or not—when people believed the company engaged with the public and used their input. Even when companies made the generally unpopular choice not to label, the study showed people considered the decision more legitimate if they believed the company listened to their customers rather than made the decision on their own. The study appeared in the *Journal of Risk Research*.

"People care about a process, even when they don't get the decision that they want," said study author Katherine McComas, professor and chair of the Department of Communication in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. "Having a fairer process can lead to a more acceptable or perceived legitimate outcome, and can improve discourse even around polarized decisions," she said.

While the study found people reacted more positively to a decision when they believed the company engaged the public, any decision that led to labelling was deemed more favorable compared to either non-labelling process. That pro-labelling attitude is in line with other research and opinion polls showing a preference for GM ingredients to be displayed on packaging, she said.

Still, McComas and her coauthors—Graham Dixon, M.S. '13, Ph.D '14, now with Washington State University; John Besley of Michigan State University; and Cornell postdoctoral associate Joseph Steinhardt—say the results could provide insight to risk managers and decision-makers about the value people place on a process that incorporates public input.

"It comes down to transparency, and this idea that people want the right to know in order to make an informed choice. A process that doesn't involve the public, or doesn't involve their values, undercuts the legitimacy of that decision. Transparency can build trust and legitimacy

in that [process](#)," McComas said.

Provided by Cornell University

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