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Calorie menu labelling in Ireland: a survey of food service businesses

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Calorie menu labelling can positively influence consumer choice without negatively affecting business⁽¹⁾. Although calorie menu labelling is currently voluntary in Ireland, best practice principles⁽²⁾ should be followed to ensure calorie information provided is useful for consumers. This study evaluated the uptake of calorie menu labelling by food service businesses in Ireland during winter 2012–2013.

Out of a random, country-wide sample of food service businesses (*n*889), grouped according to type (coffee shop/deli, fast-food, restaurant, hotel, catering companies) 72% (*n*644) were contactable and of these, 75% (*n*480) agreed to participate in a standardised telephone survey. Quantitative and qualitative information was collected on calorie menu labelling activities (current, planned or no activities) in these businesses and reasons for their answers. Perceived benefits and drawbacks of calorie menu labelling were recorded for those businesses currently displaying calorie information. Of outlets in Dublin claiming to display calories (*n*19), spot check visits were carried out on 26% (*n*5) to verify the presence of calorie menu labelling in terms of best practice principles⁽²⁾. Data was analysed using summary statistics in PASW (version 18).

	Currently claiming to display calories	Currently preparing to display calories	Would like to display calories, no future plans	No desire to display calories
	% (<i>n</i>)	% (<i>n</i>)	% (<i>n</i>)	% (<i>n</i>)
Total (<i>n</i> 480)	8 (37)	12 (58)	38 (184)	37 (175)
Coffee shop, deli (<i>n</i> 77)	16 (12)	18 (14)	34 (26)	29 (22)
Fast-food (<i>n</i> 117)	7 (8)	9 (10)	43 (50)	37 (43)
Restaurants (<i>n</i> 115)	5 (6)	12 (14)	39 (45)	37 (43)
Hotels (<i>n</i> 154)	5 (7)	10 (15)	37 (57)	43 (66)
Catering Companies (<i>n</i> 17)	24 (4)	29 (5)	35 (6)	6 (1)

*Don't Know 5% (*n*26).

As shown in the table, although only 8% of businesses currently claim to display calories, a further 50% are in favour of calorie menu labelling (i.e. currently preparing to display/would like to display calories). The main reason for providing calorie information was similar amongst those currently displaying, and those preparing to display, calories. This concerned the perception that calorie menu labelling is 'imminent' due to consumers 'wanting it'. Those that want to display calories but have no future plans cited their 'lack of skills to implement calorie menu labelling'. Those with no desire to display calories reported being 'against the whole idea' and that it was 'too costly to implement'. The main perceived benefit was 'giving information' and the majority of respondents said there were 'no drawbacks'. The spot check outlet visits found that three of the five outlets examined appeared to meet best practice principles of calorie menu labelling; while one outlet displayed calories for only a very limited number of menu items and another had no evidence of calorie menu labelling in place.

In conclusion, the majority of food service businesses surveyed are in favour of calorie menu labelling but require support to implement this. Telephone survey assessments need to include outlet visits to verify information provided and to assess quality of calorie menu labelling in terms of best practice principles, to help ensure it is useful for consumers.

1. Bollinger B, Leslie P, Sorenson A (2011) *Amer Econ J* 3, 91–128.

2. Food Safety Authority of Ireland (2012) at: <http://www.fsai.ie/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=11421>.