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PRODUCT PACKINGS AND LABELS WITH THE "NATURAL" MARK – A WAY OF CHEATING CONSUMERS

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Abstract: *Alimentary manufacturers have launched a new custom: so called natural products. After the revealing campaign about the risks of E-enriched aliments consumption, the consumers started to choose natural products. Formulations like 'natural' or 'bio' of the packings or labels do nothing else than cheating the costumer, giving him the idea that the respective aliments would be obtained without alimentary additives, with a larger alimentary safety for the consumer.*

Key words: packing, label, ecological, natural.

1. INTRODUCTION

The manufacturers have speculated the new consumers' orientation towards ecological aliments, the main method being misleading labeling. Formulations like 'natural' or 'bio' of the packings or labels do nothing else than cheating the costumer, misleading him the idea that the respective aliments would be obtained without alimentary additives, with a larger alimentary safety for the consumer.

2. NATURL ALIMENTS – ECOLOGICAL ALIMENTS

The ecological agriculture production is very strictly catalogued and at the same time sued. Only those who fulfill all the conditions can use the label formulation of 'product proceeded from ecological agriculture'. All the others formulations, such as 'bio', 'natural' or 'traditional' are nothing else than an attempt, many times succeeded, of cheating the consumers, a presentation abuse.

One of the UE quality policy objectives is to protect the consumers against the false indications regarding the origin, nature and the product essential qualities. The registering of a blend concerning the protection can be required by a group of manufacturers or a person, and the protection is granted if the utilized manufacturing methods are authentically, and the product characteristics are different from those of similar products.

By common Order no.417/110/2002 of the Agriculture, Alimentation and Forest Ministry (AAFM) and ANPC have been elaborated the norms concerning the ecological products labeling. The purpose of the labeling is the right information of the consumers regarding these products.

Conventionality with these norms, by labeling must be obligatory indicated:

- The manufacturer or processor address and name
- Product title, including the used ecologic production method.
- Authority of inspection and certification mark.
- The product keeping conditions.
- Minimum validity period.
- Interdiction of ecological products to be deposited close to other products

Norms inobservance regarding ecologically products production and labeling is sanctioned with a fine of 5-10 millions lei, which value can be actualized through a Govern decision.

For being recognized ecological, the products must refer at the way of ecological production, labeling and wrapping according actual legislation (must be mentioned "product proceeded from ecological agriculture") and to subdue to the control of a recognized institution, with the purpose of obtaining the control certificate. In this domain, Romania has legislation similar with European one since 2000. The normative papers specify that, referring to animal products, the field which becomes 'ecological' pasture mustn't be contaminated with chemical wastes for a while before the animals start to graze. In average, is about a three years rest.

But regarding the natural products domain, at this time, in Romania doesn't exist a legislation which can specify the standards for the natural or traditional production, like it happens in foreign countries. Normally, to produce in natural ways means not using fertilizer and not another synthesis substance. Unfortunately, as long as there is no inspection, the market is not fair, so it is invaded by 'natural' falsified products.

Alimentary manufacturers have launched a new custom: so called natural products. After the revealing campaign of the risks of E-enriched aliments consumption, the consumers started to choose natural products. In Romanian market we find a very small number of natural products, most of them pretending to be naturals are false. Actually, they have only one characteristic: are more expensive. We pay 20% more for the label, the product being the same. 'Natural', 'traditional' labeling doesn't respect any law except the one of common sense for now.

This kind of labeling is the key of success for many factories. An edifying case is the one of the Danubio Company. It sells five assortments of cheese with 'BIO' label. The legislation allows labeling with 'biological', 'ecological' and derived words of them only if the respective manufacturer has a certificate mentioned on the label. But on the respective products, we don't find any certificates. By this mention which represents the false aliments category, the respective company earns impressive sums. These products are sold with an average of 20000 lei/kg more expensive. Another speculator on this market is 'Raureni' preserve factory. All the products of this company are labeled like 'natural product', as coming from a society patronized by Oltchim Chemical Plant. The Raureni factory representatives have specified that aliments are natural because they are preserved in vinegar. In this companies case the supplementary incoming brought in 'natural' way in 2003, without any effort, is over 10 milliards lei/ a month.

The presence of inscriptions like this on the label runs counter labeling law, which says: 'its forbidden the mention of some information or characteristic that are not specific to the product on the label, but which induce to the buyer the idea that those products have some qualities they don't have.' But is clear that to a buyer the 'natural' type mention from a packing or a label which makes him think only to the fact that the respective aliments don't have chemical substances. National Consumer Protection Authority (NCPA) is overwhelmed by this situation and its representatives said that they are having discussions with the producers that use abusively these mentions to determine them to give up using them but with no result.

Alongside the consumers, the certified producers of these ecological products are also affected. The "Biocontrol" Attestation Society of Ecological Products in Hungary says that "the state should get involved through its control units; the members of our association have made important investments to produce ecologic".

The size of this phenomenon is hard to calculate because this sort of labels are very used in all the sectors of the food industry and we must underline that even large names use this things. If we speak about bread making we cannot forget Ana Pan, a component of the Ana Group concern. Amongst the products that they offer we find several "natural" products. These are in average 10% more expensive. What does "natural" product means to the CEO of Ana Pan? "The grain is of a very high quality and we use premixes. We wanted to create a line of ecological products, but the offer of prime materials is very high. The wheat is 6 – 7 times more expensive".

Almost 80% of the cans sold by Mark Eng. S.R.L. are "natural". The administrator of the company sees the fact that the products don't have synthetic conservators as an argument for calling them "natural". Asked about the differences between the "natural" and regular products he said: "It's the same recipe, the same method. They are successful because the people are attracted by the inscription".

The consumers understanding of the importance of getting certified ecological products will lead, of course, to the growth of the demand for this kind of products in exchange for those entitled "naturals", "bio", "traditional" or "eco", that don't apply to the rules of ecological agriculture and they're not certified by a control organism. This can be seen from the labeling of such products, on which the name and the code of the control organism that made the certification doesn't appear.

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