

Novel opportunities in food information for the European consumers and food industry – a proposal

Food product labelling currently is both at the core of the public debate, and object of European decision making. Demands for food labels tend to become more and more contradictory as these labels have to be concise and readable, contain as much relevant information as possible and have to help consumers to make responsible choices all at the same time. On the other hand online information tools and gadgets are mushrooming and can provide internet users and consumers with new options and possibilities to be informed about food products in addition to, or as an extension of, label information. These developments together create a unique opportunity to rethink the way consumers can be provided with adequate food information in a way that is welcomed by the food industry, consumers, government and retail.

In February 2008, the European Commission proposed new legislation to make food labels clearer and more relevant to consumers. The European Parliament appears divided between two approaches: one supporting more detailed information and the other providing simple guidance. It is expected that member states will agree on mandatory information but wish to reserve the right to determine how this information is presented. This would end up with a variety of approaches and visuals and would mean that both the industry and consumers continue to be treated differently in the internal market with respect to labelling requirement and information.

A new opportunity for food information: a challenging initiative

The proposed new labelling regulation creates momentum to rethink the way consumers are provided with food information. The aim of this project is to find a balance between information overload and consumer needs for food facts. The information in food labels and otherwise should be easy accessible, clear, factual and objective. The industry should be able to emphasise specific food quality aspects. On top of that, the information provided should allow consumers to choose health propagating products in order to make the healthy choice the easy choice.

To bridge these different interests, the project will bring innovative ways of food communication, labelling and online applications into the discussion. The aim is not to restart the debate or address specific labelling requirements. The approach will be practical, easy to understand, based on reliable information, cost-effective, and allow for informed choices while not being patronising. Digital and non-digital communication formats currently available and foreseen in the near future will be evaluated in the light of meeting the needs of both the industry and the consumers.

Objective of the project

The project aims at a consensus on a multi-faceted consumer information approach for all EU consumers, that is applicable in all member states -in their respective languages- and is endorsed by the key players in this field: consumers, brand manufacturers, retailers and governmental bodies. The project will facilitate a multi-stakeholder dialogue to bring together the know-how, expertise and experience in the areas of food safety, nutrition, marketing and communication. It will help find creative solutions that allow producers to emphasize food quality and consumers to make well informed choices.

Project management

The project will be managed by Orange House Partnership (OHP) with strong support from Schuttelaar & Partners. OHP is an independent non-profit partnership of senior experts with high level (largely public sector) backgrounds. It has access to the academic community in the EU and beyond and, specifically, it has expertise in food safety, nutrition and food management. This is complemented by the knowledge and expertise of Schuttelaar & Partners in communication, debate and dialogue, in print and online. The small management team will also include a few members with a background in European (food) affairs, but who are not stakeholders. The management team will be in charge of the project coordination and ensure that the project stays focussed and meets its milestones as scheduled. A more extensive advisory panel of representatives of stakeholders will ensure that all views are heard.

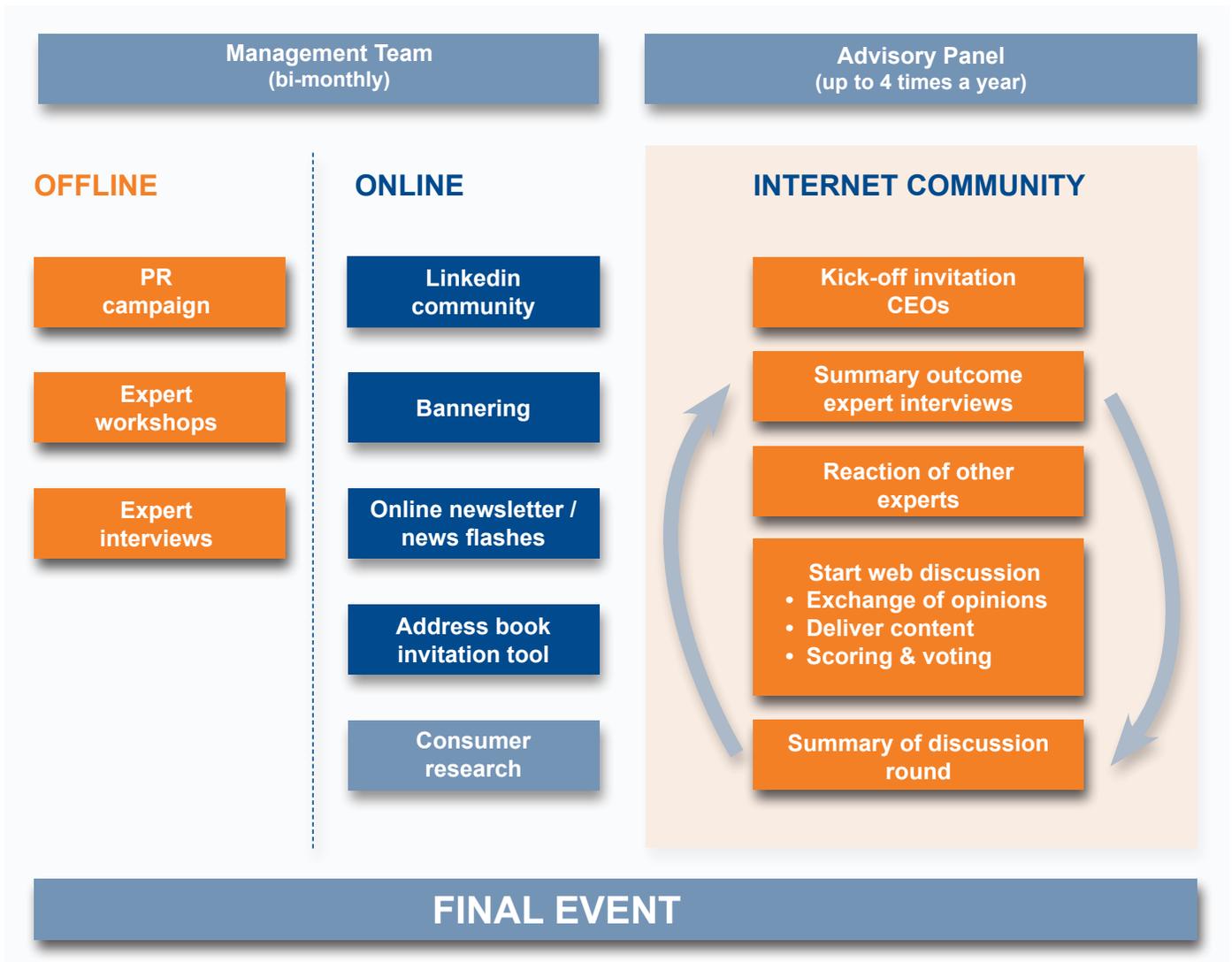
Working method

To reach the project's objective and support the implementation of the EU food labelling regulation, the aim is to reach all relevant interest groups and to facilitate a high-level dialogue, both online and off-line, on how to better inform consumers about the products they consume.

The project will include the following components:

- high-level kick-off meeting
- face-to-face meetings and off-line debates
- development and maintenance of a dedicated website and structured web-discussions
- each round starting with a kick-off interview with a highly reputable food professional, followed with comments on invitation and open debate
- establishment of an online expert community by means of address-book invitation tools, online discussion forums and social media
- visualisation of the proposed solutions
- consumer research to receive feedback on different proposals
- bannerings and articles to attract experts all over Europe to deliver their input
- an advisory panel to guide the discussion and deliver content and summaries of the rounds.

The project will include the following components (see visual on the next page).



Timing

The project will take two years and should start beginning Q3, 2010, in order to anticipate the possible outcomes of the political process and to have suggestions for timely implementation.

Deliverables

Final report to the European Commission, the national food safety and food standards authorities, and the public and private sector for EU-wide implementation including

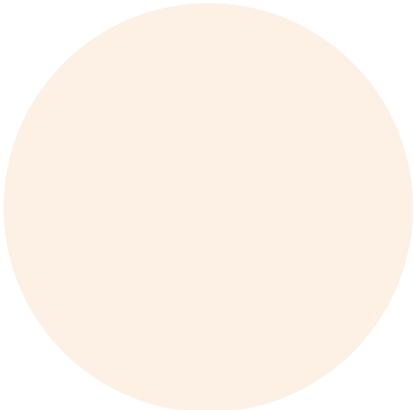
- consensus proposals for presenting the mandatory information
- consensus proposals for presenting the voluntary information
- suggestions for online approaches

Cost estimation

Overall project costs are estimated to amount 600,000 - 800,000 euro. Financial contributions for the project are sought from both the public and the private sector. A European-wide consumer market survey is not included in the estimation.

Reporting

Progress and milestone reports will be delivered every 6 months and made publicly available.



Project initiators

Orange House Partnership

Orange House is a non-profit partnership association of international senior experts in risk assessment and risk management with governmental, academic and private sector backgrounds. Our work covers the fields of chemical, microbiological and food and feed risk assessment and risk management, nutrition, and health and welfare of animals. Our experts are independent and enthusiastic about sharing the expertise and experience with professionals in countries with limited access to sources of knowledge. www.orangeOhouse.eu

Schuttelaar & Partners

Founded in 1995 Schuttelaar & Partners is an independent communications consultancy helping clients to build public support for sustainable innovations in food, agriculture, and human health. Through strategic advice, research and communication we look for approaches that take into account science, society as well as good sense. Our clients include large and small companies, public sector, research institutions, and non-profit organisations many of them operating internationally. We have over 80 experts in our offices in Brussels, The Hague and Wageningen. www.schuttelaar-partners.com

ICODA European Affairs

Founded in Brussels in 1991, ICODA European Affairs offers a broad range of companies, trade associations, interest groups and others, first-hand knowledge and expertise in EU decision-making, legislation and policy. Clients range from law firms to multinationals in a variety of sectors. ICODA also works for European associations and public authorities. www.icoda.eu

Bureau Brussels

Bureau Brussels is a corporate affairs office with a proven track record of EU issues management. We have booked results on issues ranging from alcohol taxation to an Asian management exchange programme and anti-competitive legislation. We have participating in value chain initiatives of the banking sector, to the launch of the European Retail Round Table (ERRT of CEOs), supported investment in activities like Efficient Consumer Response (ECR Europe) and the Global Commerce Initiative (GCI). www.bureaubrussels.eu

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