Title

Questionmark – IT tools for consumers on the nutritional value and sustainability of products

Short description

Questionmark is a non-political organisation which has developed a research methodology to score products based on health, environment, human rights and animal welfare. They have developed a website and two free applications for consumers which can be used to easily find information on sustainability and healthiness of products. Initially, it can only be used with food in Dutch supermarkets. In the database, Dutch supermarket food products are collected and kept up to date. Through its methodology, all products are rated on health (traffic light) and sustainability (score 1-10). Users of their grocery list application Checkit can scan barcodes of products and make a healthy, sustainable grocery list. In addition, a ranking of products is published in terms of sustainability, stimulating competition between brand owners and allowing consumers to compare products. This allows consumers to become more aware of the choices they have when buying a product and also urges companies to become more transparent.

Topic

Consuming – food

Characteristics (type, level)

Website and applications, national level

Country/Countries of implementation

The Netherlands

Aims and Objectives

Providing better information about food and to facilitate and motivate as many people as possible to do their groceries consciously. By creating transparency within food chains and towards consumers, they want to stimulate demand and supply of more sustainable products and create different competition systems.

Target Group

All Dutch consumers

Status

Implemented on a continuous basis

Start and Completion dates

2012- currently

Lifestyle and Behavior Change

By providing information about sustainability and healthiness of products using an application for mobile phones. By making consumers aware of which products are healthy and/or sustainable- this can stimulate people to buy healthier and/or more sustainable options. By providing a tool that is practical for everyday use and by helping people choosing for healthy sustainable alternatives.

Effects on:

Health and Wellbeing	By making consumers aware of which products are healthy and/or sustainable, this may stimulate people to buy healthier and/or more sustainable options, which can result in health effects.
Vulnerable populations	The application and website are free, and the information is presented in an attractive way that can be used by all. However, the application is not specifically targeting vulnerable populations and it is currently unknown whether these populations are users of the website and applications.
Environment	By making consumers aware of the health and sustainability rating of a product, the website and application aim to stimulate consumers to choose more sustainable options. Moreover, the awareness with and exposures of the ratings to consumers may stimulate food producers and supermarkets to make their products more healthy and sustainable.

Initiated and/or implemented by

Questionmark was initiated because founders felt that people have the right to know where products come from and how they are produced, and that radical transparency will start a movement to accelerate the enhancement of sustainability of production chains. They feel that consumers can and should play a bigger part in this change. Consumers should be enabled to make more conscious choices when buying products. Therefore, they should be facilitated with easy to use information about the health and sustainability of food. Questionmark is a neutral, non-political organization. Directors and managers of various organizations collaborated to start Questionmark: Planetzero, Greenpeace (both environmental organisations), Nudge (marketing consultancy agency), KPMG Sustainability, union federation ITUC (International Trade Union Federation) en KesselsKramer (an international creative communications agency).

Stakeholders and sectors involved

They collaborate closely with experts of universities (Wageningen University), NGO's, independent research institutes (the Netherlands Nutrition Centre, The Sustainability

Consortium) and sector representatives (such as the Federation of Dutch Food industry (FNLI) and Southern Agriculture and Horticulture Organization (ZLTO). Besides these, many more experts, NGO's, research institutes and sector representatives are involved.

Financial support
Greenpeace funded the first start-up phase from 2011-2013. De Nationale Postcode Loterij (National Postal Code Lottery) has supported 6 million since 2013 and will contribute another 1.5 million up till 2019 (total off 7.593.028 Euro). Several smaller subsidies were granted by the Dutch government. Currently, the organization is implementing a business income model (non-profit). The objective is that this model should provide Questionmark with a steady income in a couple of years. For the short-term, Questionmark is looking for new charity funds, to compensate for the decreasing contribution of the Lottery.

Evidence-base
Wageningen University conducted a literature study (see link at addition information question below). They concluded that there is not much known yet on the effects of applications on attitude and behavioural change among users. There are clues that applications contain a lot of useful information, but nevertheless are barely based on an individualized approach that facilitates attitude and behavioural change. There are also clues that suggest that people think that apps are laborious and googling is easier, or that they only fit people who are already interested in the content of it. Furthermore, information should be seen as trustworthy. In addition, it should be fun to use them.

Based on literature on the effects of information technology in the broad sense (not only apps), they conclude is has been proven that computers have an effect on attitude and behaviour of users, when these users were already motivated to change their attitude and or behaviour. Computers are effective when they provide tools that make the desired behaviour easier, and in the shape of virtual reality that allow people to get insight in the effects of desired behaviour or to experiment with it. They could also be effective because users get motivated, supported, rewarded or punished by the computer. Information technology on mobile phones appears extra convincing because it can persuade the user using reminders, suggestions or information at any physical location, routine, time of day, goals and current tasks.

Preconditions for effectivity of applications are mentioned, including:
it should be possible to exchange data with other appliances and people through the internet or another communication infrastructure.

Questionmark has the following options to share:
    1. to share your story about a product through uploading a link;
    2. to share the information you found via social media (Twitter, Facebook);
    3. the Checkit-app has the option to share your grocery list with peers).
Another precondition is credibility (perception of reliability and of expertise: information should be seen as honest and objective). Questionmark presents itself as an objective, neutral company that aims to display honest information, based on scientific information.

Main activities
The ratings are based on acknowledged, scientifically supported standards for sustainability, such as certifications standards for organic produce, fair trade and animal welfare, Life Cycle

Analyses and the Social Hotspot Database. Guidelines from the WHO and Dutch National Health Center are used for the health ratings. Current product categories covered by Questionmark are meat, meat supplements, fish, fruit, vegetables, dairy, cheese, eggs, ice cream, chocolate and candy, non-alcohol drinks, beer, wine. The majority of Dutch supermarket chains is covered: Albert Heijn, Jumbo, Lidl, Aldi, Coop, Hoogvliet, Plus, Ekoplaza, Hema, Marqt.

Evaluation

They have done several evaluations- one of them in 2014 on use of application and website. They monitor use of site and application, and through GreenVoice, they use marketing research tools to get in touch with users, including a campaign to find participants. They aim to include several thousands of people in the coming year (2017). Using GreenVoice, they will be able to tell who are the users. They will use a statistically appropriate research method to investigate, using a pro bono research company.

User satisfaction surveys for both website and applications are conducted on a regularly basis.

See http://www.thequestionmark.org/en/method/environment for more details.

Main results

The website is visited the most (50.000 visitors per month) compared to applications. The Questionmark application is used for a short while after it is downloaded. The Checkit application is used for a couple of months or longer and has had 14.000 downloads since August 2016 (data from December 2016).

The information provided by Questionmark is seen as quite clear and the applications are reviewed as user friendly. More critical feedback is about the content provided by Questionmark. The content (product information) is seen as not complete yet, related to the fact that some product categories lack scores on sustainability or health. Furthermore, users like to see more explanation added to the information provided, on why a product gets a certain score.

Key success factors and barriers

The following factors have partly been integrated already and are partly still on the wish list of Questionmark to develop and implement.
- Easy to use applications (development of website, apps should be user centred)
- Integrating state of the art features to stimulate usage. Such as: quantified self, gamification and social norm principles.
- Complicated information translated to easy-to-read scores and text.
- Good Search Engine Marketing, generating a lot of traffic to the website.
- Short product development cycles with a lot of consumer involvement to test and develop both information and applications.
-Independent from large institutions and business & industry: Otherwise, politics, bureaucracy and conflict of interest would hold development of this initiative back.

- Trustworthy reputation: Thus, strong governance model should guarantee independency. Need for cooperation with stakeholders in the field of science.
- Strong board, consisting of leaders in society without any conflict of interest (attachment in the food industry).
- Strong partnerships.

Barriers

- The first barrier was the big financial investment needed to develop the methodology, software, online communication channels, etc.
- Secondly, many areas needed development at the same time, resulting in an insufficient focus and lack of resources (apps development, product research, stakeholder management, creating brand & product awareness).
- Thirdly, no strong partnerships developed yet to scale up faster.
- Fourthly, for faster scale-up, larger investments in brand and product awareness are necessary. Until now, Questionmark has built its brand awareness mainly on free publicity.
- Fifthly, to manage Questionmark, its reputation takes a lot of strong stakeholder management.

INHERIT Perspective

Questionmark's website and applications are a promising INHERIT practice, because these products aim to increase consumer awareness of healthy and sustainable products in Dutch supermarkets and promote transparency and sustainability among product owners. Therefore, Capability and Motivation to purchase more healthy and sustainable products may be increased. Currently, the user background is unknown (studied in the coming year). The free nature and the Checkit app is mainly a grocery list application- enriched with information on health and sustainability, making these products promising for use among groups across the social gradient.

More information
http://www.thequestionmark.org/en

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRHVbg-MkAs

http://www.thequestionmark.org/over

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