

# Food Crimes

A CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE ON THE  
ETHICS OF MODERN FOOD PRODUCTION





**The pursuit of plenty has brought a choice of foods on a scale undreamed of 100 years ago. But at what cost? How many 'food crimes' have been committed on the way? And has real choice been reduced as multinational companies assert more and more influence over how we shop and what we eat? Consumers welcome the choice but want to take back the power they have lost as food production becomes increasingly mechanised, processed, packaged and commercialised.**

# Executive Summary

A quick glance at the supermarket shelves is enough to reveal the extraordinary progress made by the food industry in just a few decades. Today's shoppers are spoiled for choice. They can buy staple foods at affordable prices and seek out the exotic all year round. Consumers recognise these advances. They agree that, overall, choice and quality is better than it's ever been.

However, there is a downside to this. The consumers' view appears to be that the pursuit of plenty has yielded some shameful side effects. Health scares, environmental violations and animal welfare outrages have shocked the public. So much so that despite the best efforts of many in the food chain, today's consumers are broadly mistrustful of the industry which fills their plates.

*They are:*

- Bewitched by advertising and promotions designed to charm them into buying products of questionable quality and nutritional value
- Bothered by failed food safety promises, the unnatural farming of animals and the exploitation of their children
- Bewildered by the dazzling array of choice and the competing - often meaningless - claims made by food manufacturers

Consumers have become cynical. They suspect that profit is being put before safety – and that they are not being given the full story. In short, it's putting them off their food.

The Co-op knows this. It consulted with consumers, through independent research with NOP, and found them suspicious and fearful. As a consequence it is launching a series of radical inquiries into the seven issues the Co-op has dubbed 'food crimes'. And a number of initiatives will start the process of redressing the balance of power between consumers and big business.

# Contents

- 4** The Seven Food Crimes
- 6** Too Much to Swallow?
- 12** Power to the Shopper
- 13** Responsible Retailing and the Co-op
- 14** The Co-op's Campaigning Successes

# The Seven Food Crimes

The impetus to cut costs, produce and sell more underpins the way the world rears its animals, grows its crops and manufactures and markets its food, sometimes with alarming effects. Indeed, these perceived food-related felonies are usually committed with the full force of the law and the scientific community working against consumers' views. The trouble is they just don't recognise that science and the law frequently lag behind consumer opinion, which often condemns as abhorrent the practices the Co-op has identified as the 'seven food crimes'...

**1. Blackmail – The insidious targeting of the public by global big business putting huge marketing muscle behind products that fail to fit in with healthy eating advice.**

Parents, in particular, feel they are in competition with advertisers who they believe deliberately target their children. Advertising and promotion fan the flames of 'pester power'. The Co-op found that 73 per cent of children ask their parents to buy sweets and crisps they have seen advertised, and only 19 per cent of children give up when their parents say no. Meanwhile 71 per cent of kids have bought something on the strength of a free gift or special offer.

**2. Contamination – The unnecessary use of chemicals on land and in livestock – interference with nature's way.**

Consumers have no faith in the premise that chemicals improve quality. Just one quarter of people believe pesticides deliver better quality fruit and vegetables. This uneasiness is exacerbated by the fact that shoppers feel powerless to avoid them – 64 per cent believe washing food will not remove pesticides. Feeding animals with growth-promoting antibiotics met with the disapproval of 87 per cent of consumers in the Co-op survey.

**3. GBH\* – The disregard of animal rights to keep costs down or, even worse, to pamper our taste buds with so called 'luxuries'.**

Intensive farming of livestock has transformed the lives of farm animals. The desire to increase yield has been placed above all else with the result that for poultry, females could be crammed into cages, males could be gassed at birth. Some animals literally never see the light of day until they are sent for slaughter. Geese are force-fed to produce foie gras. 84 per cent are concerned that animals are not treated properly. But the public's disquiet goes beyond passive pity. In total, 61 per cent 'want to know more' about the conditions animals are kept in, although nearly a fifth prefer ignorance because they feel powerless to change the situation.

\*Grievous Bodily Harm

#### **4. Vandalism – The destruction of the planet by the intensification of food production systems.**

Consumers seem worried that the ecosystem is being irreversibly damaged by the profit motive of the food industry with potentially catastrophic results. The survey found 72 per cent believe the environment is being damaged by global food production. 70 per cent of consumers disapprove of the application of human sewage on farmland as a fertiliser and 82 per cent of people are concerned that wildlife suffers as a result of intensive farming. What's more, consumers are unimpressed by the supposed gains made by such methods – 74 per cent feel too much attention is paid to what fruit and vegetables look like. And on the heated issue of GM, 91 per cent disapproved of products made with this technology.

#### **5. Cannibalism – The practice of permitting animals to be fed with the remains of their own species, or herbivores with animal by-products, or giving animals feed made from the blood of other animals.**

Despite the revulsion to these practices expressed by consumers - Government officials admitted as recently as April 2000 that for certain species this is still allowed. Consumers seem well aware of such abuses. Co-op research found 55 per cent, for example, familiar with the practice of making feed from animal blood. Needless to say, they do not approve. 86 per cent disapprove of animal blood and 90 per cent disapprove of the use of chicken feathers. Predictably, 73 per cent of consumers believe these practices have a 'bad effect' on what we eat. And when asked whether BSE was just an isolated health scare, 83 per cent of consumers disagree and suggest 'there are others'.

#### **6. Pillage – The careless exploitation of countries, cultures and creeds by multinational concerns milking the so-called global economy.**

Whilst welcoming year-round availability, people seem concerned that the laissez faire development of the global economy is destroying livelihoods, communities and the environment. 85 per cent of people feel big multinational companies have too much power over what we eat. 89 per cent think that multinationals do not act in the interests of the general public, 81 per cent think that it is wrong for third world farmers to be exploited to bring us cheap food and 64 per cent worry that the standards of farming will not be as strict as they are in Britain.

#### **7. Fraud – The deliberate assault on the taste and appearance of our food.**

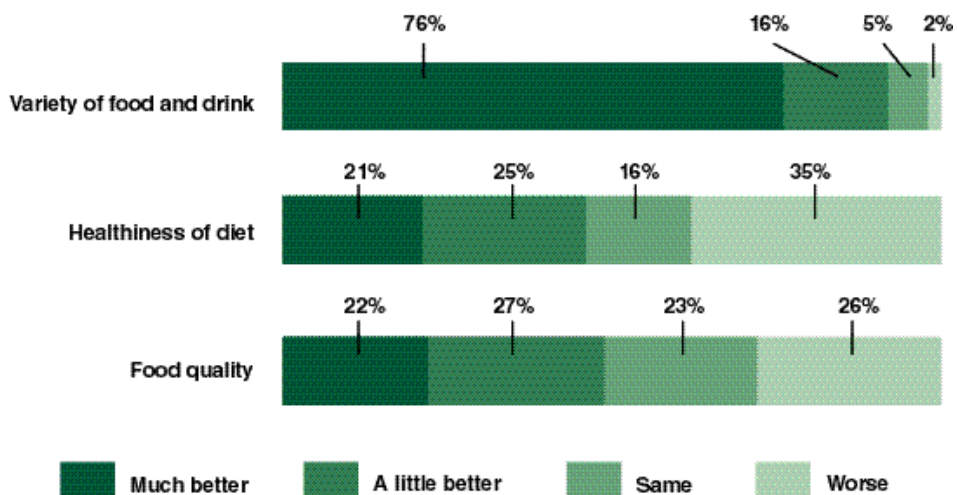
The Co-op survey found that 74 per cent think artificial colours are unnecessary or even harmful and 93 per cent believe people have the right to know everything that has happened to their food, not just about the ingredients on the label. 82 per cent of consumers feel additives and flavourings used in convenience food often hide the taste of natural ingredients.

# Too Much to Swallow?

Consumers give their views

How do consumers feel about these food crimes? Are they well informed? Do they feel powerless to change anything? Do they care? If so, whom do they blame? The Co-op asked them for their views.

Development in food and drink production over the last 20 years



## The Benefits

Modern food methods are not without their dividends. Few dispute that. The question is how we balance these advantages against the ethical and environmental costs involved. Consumers overwhelmingly welcome the choice, cost, convenience and quantity of goods available. But it's a minority who are unquestioning about the effects of commercialisation.

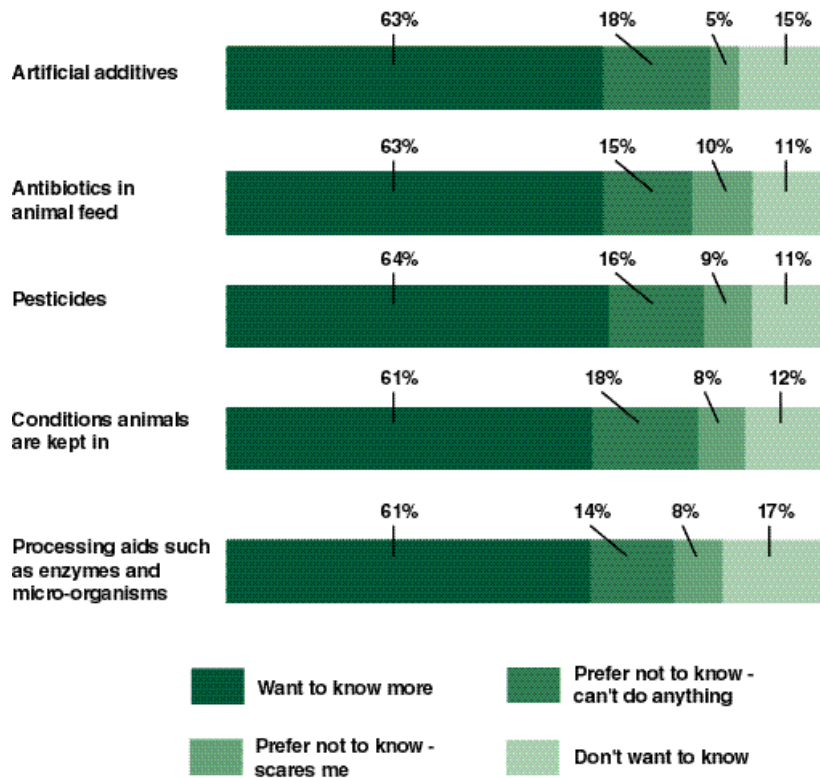
**"We can't go back to the days when mum was at home all day cooking three meals a day."**

**"I think it's wonderful, I really do. I love eating what I want when I want."**

## Information

Overall consumers feel frustrated by their lack of knowledge of what goes into their food and how it is made. Although some express an ‘ignorance is bliss’ attitude which permits them to enjoy their meals without guilt, others prefer not to know because they feel powerless to effect change or because it ‘scares’ them. However, the majority prefer to be able to make informed choices.

### Public awareness of product information



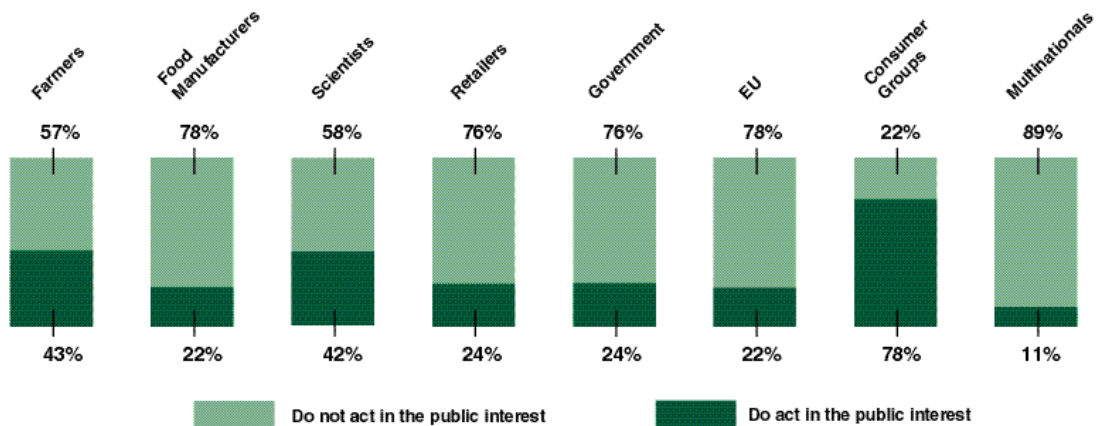
"I deliberately ignore some of it as I want to eat meat and I find it too disturbing to watch. If I watched enough of those programmes, I'd probably go vegetarian."

"They are too frightened to tell us what is in the food. No one in their right mind would eat a chicken which has been pumped full of antibiotics."

## The Culprits

It appears the public have lost confidence in most groups associated with the food industry. They believe the profit motive generally scores over the public interest. Multinationals rate especially poorly, with retailers, manufacturers and the government faring little better. However, the public do not absolve themselves from blame. Some believe their own apathy adds to the malaise.

### Perception of which groups act in the public interest on food production and safety



"Battery chickens, battery cows ... everything is intensively kept. Piglets are taken away a couple of hours old ... sows are constantly having piglets ... to me that is intensive farming. It's a big problem."

"(For the supermarkets) produce has got to be a certain size, shape and colour ... so if the product isn't up to scratch then the farmer just has to destroy a lot of it."

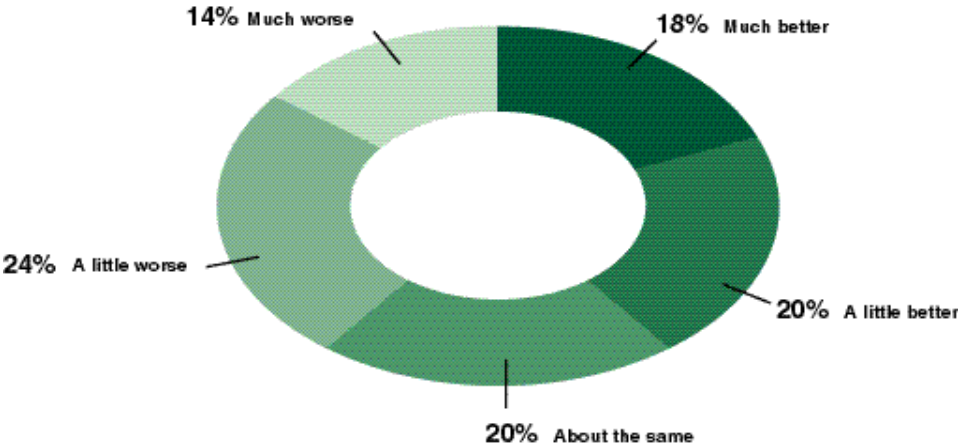
**"I saw a documentary on how they were kept. I'm not an animal lover but it made me cry. It was evil. They can't even stand up properly. They can't stretch their wings."**

**"I was shocked when I found out it was already in American soya. That sort of hit me. I thought – how could they have done this without asking me or telling me first."**

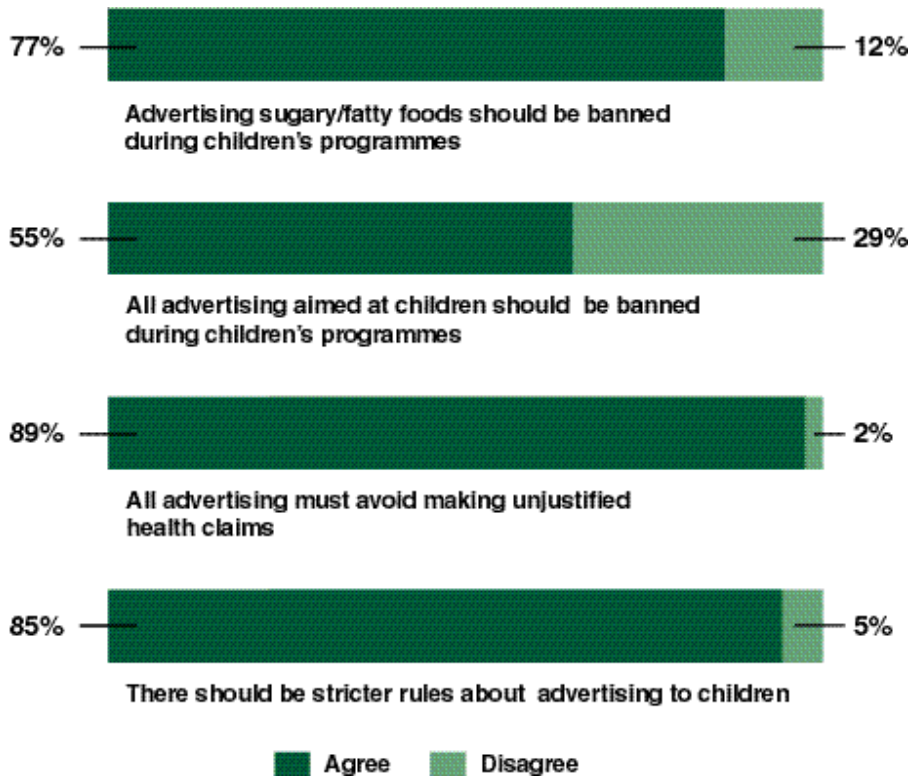
### **The Perpetrators**

The advertising industry argues that parents should control what their children eat, yet a welling anger and sense of powerlessness comes through in parents' attitudes to the targetting of children by the food industry. Parents are split about whether children's diets are better than in years gone by, but, according to a 1999 report in Public Health and Nutrition (the Nutrition Society's publication), 40 years ago children ate substantially more bread and vegetables and less sugar and soft drinks, so their diets were arguably better for them than what children eat today. However, parents are under pressure to buy 'junk' foods. Pester power is fuelled by the marketing of big corporations and it's parents who bear the brunt. When Sweden takes over the EU Presidency it is expected to press for its own ban on advertising to children to be extended to the rest of Europe - a move which the UK advertising industry is expected to oppose.

**Perception of diet nowadays compared to parent's diet as a child**



## Attitudes towards advertising to children



"If we don't get it for them then we are bad, we are cruel, we are the misers."

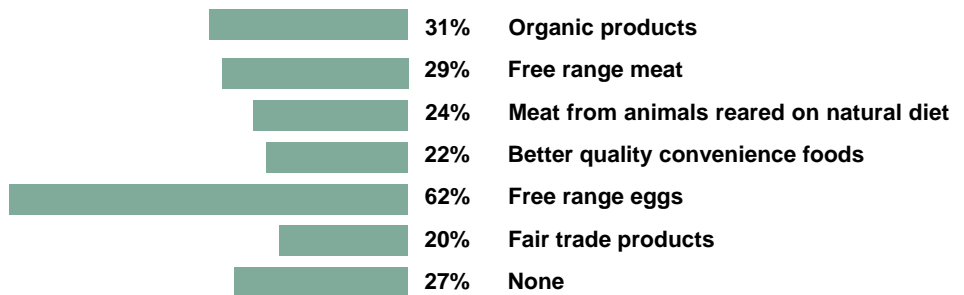
"I don't want them to hassle me in the supermarket... I want my children to grow up sensibly and not be led by advertisers."

"If you have a two-year-old lying on the ground and a five-year-old screaming, I give in, I just want to get out of the shop."

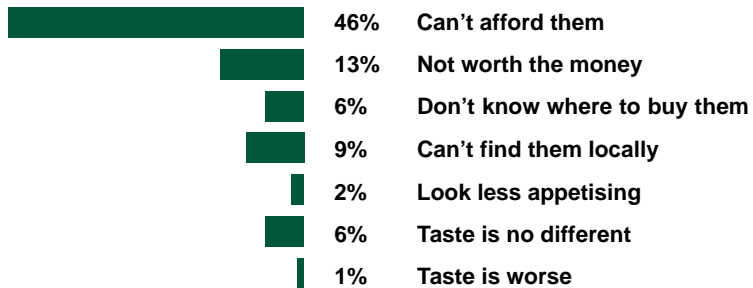
## The Fightback

Consumers often feel powerless and want to know more when it comes to food crimes. Yet they are crying out for the means to act. Small individual acts of defiance are made every time a shopper boycotts a certain product or opts for an alternative such as free range eggs. The most successful example is the consumer backlash against GM. But price still holds them back and the overall impression is that the public would respond to a lead from those within the food industry.

### Active purchasing of certain products



### Barriers to purchasing these products



**"If everybody stopped buying GM foods then they wouldn't bother. It wouldn't be viable financially for them to do it."**

**"I dig my head in the sand because the issues are so huge. But if I felt they were going to do something about it I would be delighted and I would shop there more."**

# Power to the Shopper

**Irrespective of what practices the law permits, irrespective of what scientific evidence supports, consumers are clearly distressed by the food crimes committed in the name of progress.**

**So much so that the Co-op believes they are demanding ACTION on:**

- the advertising and marketing of 'unhealthy' foods to children
- the feeding of animals with growth promoting antibiotics
- inhumane battery cages
- the feeding of animals with blood and other animal by-products

**We also believe consumers want more information and much TIGHTER controls on:**

- the use of pesticides and chemicals on the land
- the presence of GM in the food chain
- the use of chemicals that alter the taste and appearance of food
- the exploitation of producers and consumers by multinational concerns

As a consumer-owned business run for its members, the Co-op cannot ignore the overwhelming sense of unease among shoppers on these issues. We recognise the implications are potentially enormous for agriculture and the food chain as well as Governments and the scientific community. There are powerful vested interests in maintaining the status quo.

The challenge looks awesome, but the Co-op is committed to an inquiry within the industry. Where evidence emerges it will respond to these concerns with specific initiatives involving its own products and policies. Giving power back to the consumer will not happen overnight. It requires co-operation from all parties.

**The seven food crimes identified will each be subject to a Co-op inquiry. The first is already under way. It is delving into the exploitation of children by food advertisers. We will investigate the stranglehold major global food firms have on what our children eat and put forward plans to restore power to parents. We will report on this in summer 2000 after working with leading consumer groups to establish an action plan which we, and hopefully others, will commit to.**

Later this year and into 2001 we will investigate consumer concerns about farming practices using the Co-op's unique position as Britain's leading farmer and consumer-owned retailer. We will also look into the junk food culture and the power wielded by big multinational companies over food production.

# Responsible Retailing and the Co-op

**The responsible retailing campaign was launched in 1995 after the biggest ever survey of consumer views. More than 30,000 people responded and the message was clear: shoppers want to make informed purchasing decisions based on concerns about animal welfare, the environment and human rights.**

In response the Co-op pledged to give consumers the full facts on products, including details of who makes Co-op Brand products. A Right to Know policy was implemented to provide consumers with the facts they need to make informed purchasing decisions.

The Co-op has a democratic base of individual members. Each member has an individual vote no matter how much money they have invested in the Co-op. They belong to the Co-operative Movement because they believe in a wide range of consumer and social issues. As a unique consumer-owned retailer the Co-op has a duty to serve consumers, not industry or the City.

The Co-op has always been at the forefront of retailing issues, leading industry and interpreting the law in the best interest of the consumer. Among its campaigns are:

- 1995**     **Responsible Retailing** - A report based on the UK's largest ever independent survey of ethical concerns
- 1995**     **The Plate of the Nation** - A report on the national diet
- 1996**     **Ending the Pain** - Finding a solution to stop animal testing
- 1997**     **Lie of the Label** - A report calling for honest labelling
- 1998**     **Jury's Verdict** - Reporting on complaints and adjudications under the Co-op's code of labelling practice
- 1999**     **Breaking the Barriers** - Co-operating for social inclusion

The Co-op has broken ranks with the rest of the industry when it has been in the interest of the consumer and, if necessary, it will continue doing so in the future.

# The Co-op's Campaigning Successes

- 2000** The Co-op is the first retailer to launch Fairtrade Mark bananas and its own brand Fairtrade chocolate.
- 2000** Lindane use as an agricultural treatment is banned for all Co-op Brand products as part of wider controls on pesticide use.
- 1999** GM ingredients are removed from Co-op Brand food products. It remains the only retailer to label cheese when it has been produced using genetic modification and is therefore suitable for vegetarians.
- 1999** The Co-op is the first retailer to introduce the new cruelty-free symbol developed by leading international animal welfare organisations, including the BUAV.
- 1999** Sees the introduction of the Co-op's LoSalt initiative and the commitment continues with the reduction of salt in Co-op bread in 2000.
- 1998** Co-op 99 Tea becomes the first mainstream food product to be marketed using ethical sourcing criteria.
- 1998** Through its Consumer Jury, the Co-op is the first retailer to give customers the power to change its labels if they feel consumers are being misled.
- 1998** The Co-op is the first retailer to give information about ingredients and processing aids on its wines and spirits labels, campaigning for a change in the law which prohibits the inclusion of this information.

- 1998** Following health concerns over excessive amounts of salt in the diet, the Co-op moves salt information to the front of own label packs.
- 1997** Through the Honest Labelling campaign, the Co-op identifies labelling ‘tricks of the trade’ which are used to make products look and sound bigger and better than they really are. The Co-op produces a code of practice and calls for industry to adhere to it.
- 1996** The Co-op challenges suppliers to reduce the amount of fat and salt in Co-op products to help achieve Nutrition Task Force targets. The Co-op becomes the first retailer to label calories and fat on front of pack.
- 1996** The Co-op joins with the Fairtrade Foundation to develop a monitoring programme. The scheme aims to deliver fair and reasonable working conditions for workers in factories producing Co-op goods around the world.
- 1996** The Co-op leads the industry by putting sensible drinking advice on its wines and spirits, in addition to alcohol units already stated.
- 1995** The Co-op is the first retailer to label eggs ‘intensively produced’. This leads to a change in the law, allowing eggs to be labelled ‘from caged hens’. The move is welcomed by consumers and pressure groups angry with packaging depicting idyllic farmyard scenes and describing battery eggs as ‘farm fresh’.
- 1995** The Co-op makes a commitment to ensure labels give as much clear information as possible.

- 1995** Leading the way, the Co-op becomes the only retailer to give consumers information on the manufacturers of its own brand products.
- 1994** The Co-op becomes the first retailer to provide a Freephone number and a Freepost address on Co-op Brand products, making it easier for customers to make enquiries. As part of the Co-op's Access for All policy, this service has since been extended to open seven days a week until 10pm, to make information accessible and convenient for more people. Co-op information is now available in Braille, large print, on cassette and a Freephone Minicom line.
- 1994** The Co-op is the first retailer to support the development of the RSPCA Freedom Food scheme to improve the welfare standards for animals at all stages of the food chain with a range of Co-op Brand Freedom Food products.
- 1992** The Co-op pioneers the use of integrated crop management (ICM) on its own farms, whilst working with farmers and retailers to establish crop protocols to minimise chemical use.
- 1992** The Co-op becomes the first major retailer to sell fairly traded Cafe Direct coffee. The range has since been expanded to include other Fairtrade coffees, teas and chocolate.
- 1990** The Co-op announces that no Co-op Brand toiletries or household products, or their ingredients, have been tested on animals after 1985. This was followed with the Co-op's 'Ending the Pain' campaign against animal testing in the toiletries industry and backing for FRAME to support alternative means of testing.

**For further information:**

**Please write to CWS Ltd, Freepost MR9 473, Manchester M4 8BA,  
visit our website at [www.co-op.co.uk](http://www.co-op.co.uk) or call us free on 0800 0686727**

The Co-op commissioned market research by NOPConsumer who interviewed 1,216 adults (523 of whom were parents) and 293 children under 11 years old. Group discussions were also conducted by Wardle McLean Strategic Research Consultancy with adults (including parents) and children under 11 years old. The research was conducted in February and March 2000.

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