

“Don’t Label Me!”

Today’s food label trends reflect the struggle to define “good”

Food labels represent the endpoint of the industry’s and the public’s discussions about food values: where food comes from, how it’s made, and how safe and healthful it is. Government requirements, manufacturer branding, consumer trends, and activist campaigns all influence what appears on the label. And where. And how. These conversations can brew for years before coming to a head. The Intel Distillery uses proprietary analysis tools to rank some important recent conversations by how frequently industry influencers discuss these topics and then compares that with broader social media traffic for context.

What the Influencers Say



1. NATURAL: A now-ubiquitous label, perhaps because the FDA’s labeling standard for “natural” is so vague, has spurred lawsuits by special interest groups against major food and beverage producers — including **General Mills Inc.**, **LaCroix**, **Pret a Manger**, and **Sanderson Farms, Inc.** — to change their sourcing policies.



2. PLANT-BASED: As **channels** have expanded availability of meat and milk alternatives, animal products producers have taken steps to protect their livelihood. **Milk** and **beef** industry groups are now calling for the FDA and USDA to clarify what can be labeled as “milk” or “meat” to prevent “consumer confusion.”



3. ORGANIC: Despite overseeing organic label standards since 2000, the USDA has watched support for its National Organic Program erode as new standards emerge, including Regenerative Organic Certification and the Real Organic Project. Additionally, **The Washington Post** investigated issues around ongoing fraud in the organic industry.



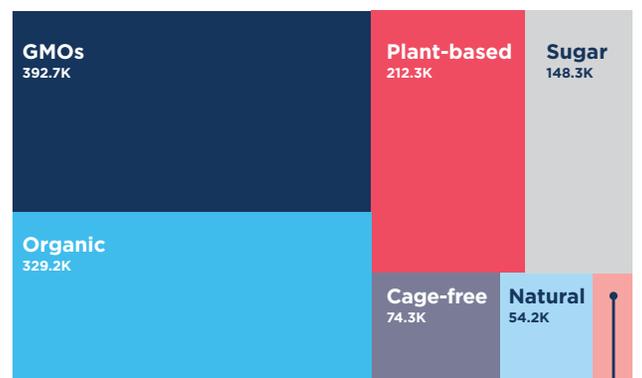
4. GMOs: Congress passed a law in 2016 requiring labels for genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in food. However, the USDA’s **National Bioengineered Food Disclosure Standard** published in December 2018 sparked industry debate around how the label addresses **safety** and **transparency** concerns. **Activist groups** opposed the department’s use of “bioengineered” instead of “GMO.”



5. SUGAR: Recent **studies** have tilted dietary recommendations away from sugar consumption, leading to the addition of a line for “added sugars” on an upcoming revision of the **Nutrition Facts** panel. This year, **Bud Light** played up the anti-sugar angle in Super Bowl commercials that attacked rivals for using corn syrup in their brewing. That brew-haha remains ongoing.

What the People Say

This past year, consumers have shown growing interest in discussing plant-based foods, but the bulk of social media commentary on food labeling has focused on GMO and organic foods. The term “GMO” was used far more often on social media platforms than the USDA-official term “bioengineering.” Notably, “clean label” and similar terms commonly used in the industry remain largely unused by consumers. Although antibiotic use in food production sparked some online discussion, very little of that attention was directed toward labeling.

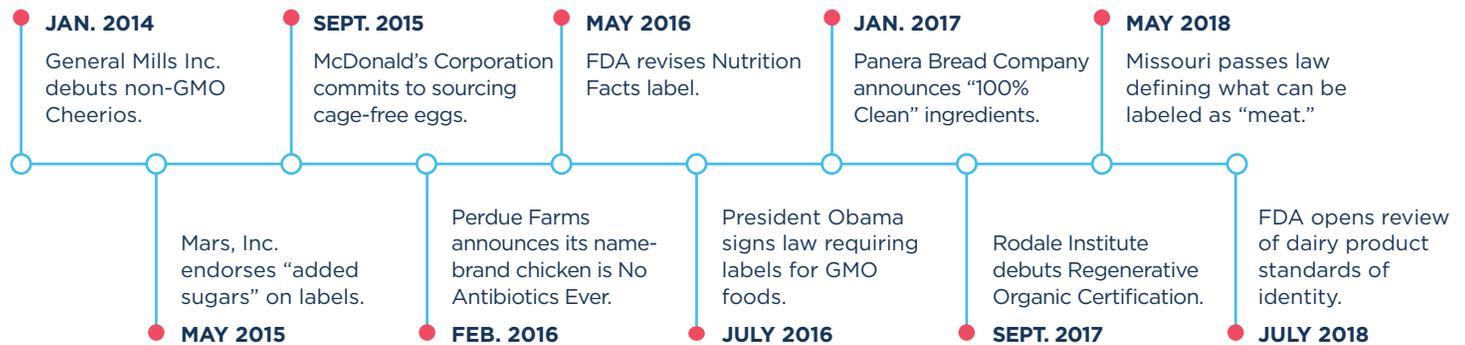


Social media engagements on labeling topics, March 2018 to February 2019. Data collected via Buzzsumo.

Antibiotics
20K

Defining by What's NOT There

Major Milestones in the "Free-from" Phenomenon, 2014-19



In a competitive retail space, food companies often leverage label claims for product differentiation. One way of defining a product by what it's not is "clean label," and this has become a growing trend. Ironically, brands still tend to crowd their label real estate with all manner of descriptions ranging from "no artificial flavors" and "no preservatives" to "non-GMO" and "no antibiotics ever." As brands add more claims to packages, influencers have more to debate, and consumers get more information to process with each purchase decision.

Insights From Key Influencers

We chose a handful of sample quotes from the most frequently cited influencers driving discussions around labeling issues. As industry conversations evolve, these names and their messages tend to persist and rise above the din.



THE REFORMER

SCOTT GOTTLIEB, MD, FDA COMMISSIONER (RESIGNED MARCH 2019)

"Information about how healthy our food is gives us the chance to make better choices about our diets. This same information also inspires competition among producers to formulate food in ways that make it more healthful." ([FDA](#))



THE ACTIVIST

ANDREW KIMBRELL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CENTER FOR FOOD SAFETY (CFS)

"The USDA has betrayed the public trust by denying Americans the right to know how their food is [produced]. ... USDA's prohibition of the well-established terms, GE and GMO, on food labels will confuse and mislead consumers." ([CFS](#))



THE INDUSTRY VOICE

DANA GRABER, REGULATORY COUNSEL, FOOD MARKETING INSTITUTE (FMI)

"Food retailers have long supported transparency, and work hard to provide customers with the information they want in order to make informed purchasing decisions." ([FMI](#))



THE ACADEMIC

JAYSON LUSK, PHD, HEAD OF THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS AT PURDUE UNIVERSITY

"Just because a federal definition of natural exists does not mean consumers know or understand the definition." ([Jayson Lusk](#))