

Sainsbury's Response to the ASA Ruling

Thursday 1 August, 2013

If there's one big lesson that we should all have learned from the horsemeat scandal, it's that customers care deeply about where their food comes from and how it is produced.

While no horsemeat was found in any Sainsbury's products, it's absolutely clear to us that provenance and ethics form a fundamental part of customers' decision making as they choose what to feed their families.

We know this because we speak with thousands of customers every day. They tell us that food integrity matters to them just as much whether they are well-off or struggling to make ends meet.

This might seem pretty obvious.

Well, it is obvious to us, and you'd have thought it would be obvious to Tesco. They have recently begun an attempt at recasting their ethical image and pushing fresh food credentials in a high-profile marketing campaign which encourages us to "love every mouthful".

But there's a basic contradiction between this advertising and the way they're operating their "Price Promise". We've made a formal complaint to the Advertising Standards Authority about this. The arguments Tesco have used to defend their position include the suggestion that customers don't actually care all that much about the provenance of their food or the ethical aspects of food production.

We're pretty sure that customers would disagree.

Let's take a couple of examples. In its "Price Promise", Tesco compares the price of Sainsbury's basics Ham with Tesco Everyday Value Ham. Well, they're priced the same but our pork is British and Tesco's is sourced from somewhere in the EU. They're not the same product. The idea that they are is really rather odd - not least since Tesco boss Philip Clarke recently told the National Farmers' Union "customers say they are concerned about the provenance of their meat, and that they want to buy British".

Similarly, Tesco argues in its "Price Promise" that it is appropriate to compare the prices of Sainsbury's basics Tea Bags with Tesco Everyday Value Tea Bags. Again, they're priced the same, but our teabags are Fairtrade, and Tesco's are not. This means that for our basics Tea a minimum tea price is guaranteed for farmers at origin and we pay a social premium to support local communities in the established tea growing countries in Africa. Tesco Value Tea does not.

Fair comparison?

Or to put it another way, would anyone think it was fair to pass off a product as Fairtrade when it was not? I don't believe customers would think so.

When we originally challenged Tesco on its "Price Promise" advert earlier this year Tesco's marketing director David Wood wrote:

"Although ethical considerations may play a minor part in the customer's considerations, we do not believe that this would be key to a customer's transactional decision-making process, particularly in relation to these value products".

In other words, Tesco is saying that customers are not troubled by ethical considerations, especially for more affordable products.

Tesco recently said it wants to "make what matters better, together". Customers might be forgiven for thinking it could start with a bit more openness in its "Price Promise," making clear that its starting point is that ethical sourcing and provenance are not "key" to customers.

We have always believed that our values make us different, regardless of whether it's a basics or a Taste the Difference product, as customers trust us to do the right thing. We are proud to be the world's largest retailer of Fairtrade products. We're also the UK's leading retailer of Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) fish and RSPCA Freedom Food products and we don't think it's good enough to claim, as Tesco does, to "choose not to" pay the licence fee for accreditation.

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At Sainsbury's, responsible sourcing of the best quality food has always been an important part of who we are. That's why we've committed to doubling the amount of British food we sell by 2020. All our fresh chicken has been 100% British for the last ten years, and now we've also achieved 100% British for all our fresh pork.

We're in a competitive marketplace - and we don't shy away from price comparisons. Our 'Brand Match' scheme checks prices - including promotions - against Asda and Tesco for thousands of branded goods. After all, a tin of Heinz baked beans is the same wherever you buy it.

Comparing own brands is a different matter. The Tesco Price Promise claims to be a fair comparison which makes sense to shoppers. Unfortunately it is anything but. By failing to compare own brands fairly it is taking power away from customers to make accurate and informed choices about the food they put in their baskets. Worse, it undermines their ability to make a choice based on the values they believe in.

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