



## Value for Money

**check the labels to see what you are getting for your dollar**

You may have seen our Popcorn series "Fair Dinkum"; but for those of you who haven't yet, I'll tell you how the Australian saying originated. In the early days of the colonies, the goldfields attracted anyone wishing to make a quick fortune. This applied to miners and traders alike, the latter providing essentials such as hardware, food and one particular comfort that prospectors couldn't do without - liquor. Dishonest owners of some drinking establishments gave short measure and watered the whisky, practices that didn't go down well with the clientele who complained bitterly and sometimes physically. The recipients of this justified but brutal reaction were often the Chinese waiters who would try to reassure their customers that what they were serving was undiluted and a fair drink. For them, pronunciation of the English language was the pidgin variety and the words came out as Fair Dinkum. Over time, the corrupted phrase was adopted by Australians in everyday life and is still used by many as a declaration of honesty and fairness. So, when they say something is fair dinkum, they mean it is unadulterated and the real McCoy.

Buying and selling has come a long way since those rough-and-ready times; unfortunately, so has greed. When a new product is first introduced into the market place, it has to earn a reputation to survive. Usually, it will be the best it can be for the price in order to generate repeat sales and hopefully future profits. Many factors contribute to success including the added expense of advertising, so necessary to compete with other producers who offer items of a similar nature. A battle begins in the market place. Prices may have to be reduced to increase the volume of sales, and to remain profitable costs need trimming. This could be in the manufacturing process, in the components or ingredients, or in the packaging. In some cases, quality suffers, but products that aren't as reliable or as tasty as they used to be quickly lose popularity. The problem for the prospective stayers is how to stabilise or increase profits by cost-cutting in other areas.

In this scenario, the consumer is frequently the target. Shopping is just one chore in a busy day and most people don't have time to amble lazily round the stores. They have a pretty good idea of what they want and they know where to find it in the supermarket because it's always on the same shelves. As long as the price isn't inflated, they'll grab a packet here and a can there – the same brands they've been buying for years. Manufacturers know this. They also know that shoppers take much for granted and rarely scrutinise information on labels. Although they are required by law to provide details on the content of goods inside their packaging, it isn't necessarily done in a way that is obvious to the customer. The fine print may say it all, which is ideal if a magnifying glass is to hand. As for some of the more important facts, to the consumer at least, these will be in print that is a little larger, but not over-much – the weight, for example. It does seem a bit sneaky, however, that the 185g tag is consigned to a position which can easily be missed, especially being on a background colour that makes it even harder to read.

Let's have a closer look at a family favourite – the humble bag of potato crisps. The packet design hasn't changed much over time, nor the familiar brand name. There are more flavours these days, recognisable by different colours, pictures and a word or two advertising the taste they are supposed to represent. Another come-on is a bold statement that these crisps are cholesterol-free and contain less fat than their predecessors. Also, the size of the bag appears as per usual; therefore, it is assumed, what it holds is pretty much the same as the bags did in years gone by – wrong, perhaps on both counts! Nobody would notice if the plastic bag was just a few millimetres smaller, especially not in height; and it looks pretty full, as it would – that's thanks to a certain amount of air. It can't be opened before purchase, so some personal guess-work has to be employed to ascertain how much is in the bag. What does it feel like? Well, there's a bunch in the bottom of what one would suppose is potato chips taking up about half the space. A disclaimer on the label explains the possibility of this - some settling of contents may occur. A little shake, however, and - whoop-de-doo! - they're back to full measure.

Actually, what is that – the same as five years ago, or a lesser amount presented in a way that fools the gullible consumer into believing nothing has changed? Weighing the bag in the hand doesn't tell much requiring a search for a tell-tale number somewhere on the packet. The actual weight will be there, honestly stated, probably tucked away down the bottom. That's because when the packet sits on the shelf it bulges at the base hiding whatever's printed there. A bit devious maybe, but quite legal; as is the reduction in weight over a period – from 230g, to 200g, then 185g, 175g and 165g. Almost the same-size packet, but containing less product and more air. The one advantage to customers is that they will be eating less junk food per packet – how kind!

Potato chips are the thin end of the wedge. The same practice is employed across the board. If a candy bar doesn't seem as big as it used to, there's every likelihood that it isn't. A check of the label will confirm the suspicion. Looks can deceive, unless they are directed to the right place on the packaging. To aid customers, in Australia anyway, shops now state not only the weight and price of the entire contents of a product on the shelf ticket, but also the cost for a standard amount: such as 100g. This enables a comparison of actual value to be made between different brands of the same product. I won't insult your intelligence by explaining how that works; but be advised it isn't quite the same with all items. Using a similar principle, toilet rolls can be advertised by cost per roll, or per number of sheets; but are they 2-ply, or 3-ply; and how big are those individual sheets in comparison? Never mind the quality: who ever bothers to check the width or length of baking-paper and cling-wrap rolls?

Over to the meat section. Nothing could possibly be amiss here - what you see is what you get. Of course it is, including the water they pump in, the weight of which costs the same as the meat. This is just to keep it fresh, they say. Well, thanks for that - at least I won't have to spend out on tap-water to re-hydrate it.

In this highly-competitive market place, ordinary folk are being duped daily. Fair-trading is only becoming a thing of the past because people are in a rush and don't have time to question the value of products they buy on a regular basis. But even if it's just once in a while, I feel sure that decisions made regarding future purchases will be very different when not in complete ignorance of these shifty practices.

We may be somewhat short on Chinese waiters to advise on quality; but we ought to be able to figure this out for ourselves. Maybe then, we can send the message to our suppliers that they'd better be Fair Dinkum, or else...!

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