

Digital tools and essential consumer information

The case for drug information leaflets

Digital tools, e-labels? and QR codes for consumers

Digital tools and e-labelling, such as QR codes, can offer consumers more detailed and interactive information on products that cannot readily be provided “on” or “with” a product in physical form.

Overall, consumers are looking for the innovation offered by digital tools and expect them to deliver concrete added value. However, when it comes to accessing basic consumer information, particularly medical-related information, the story gets more nuanced, as is demonstrated by Euroconsumers’ survey on “QR Codes on Drug Leaflets”[\[1\]](#).

The case for drug leaflets

Consumers value drug leaflets

Euroconsumers’ survey results show that consumers turn to their general practitioner or pharmacist when looking for information on OTC drugs. For non-OTC drugs, the general practitioner is also by far the first source of information.

However, that story becomes more nuanced when consumers are experiencing possible side effects from drugs. Especially when these side effects are mild, consumers in Belgium, Spain, Italy and Portugal indicated that they first look for the medical leaflet. When taking a drug for the first time a large majority of consumers said they usually read the leaflet, either in-depth or focussing on specific information, even when the drugs were prescribed by a doctor or recommended by a pharmacist.

The main reasons indicated for not reading the leaflet were that consumers believe it's too long/it takes too much time (27%); letters are too small to read (23%); it's worrisome, there is too much frightening information (20%); and it's too technical (18%). All important indicators of the legibility of medical leaflets urgently need to be improved.

Paper versus digital

When asked how they prefer to read the patient's information leaflet, the answer from consumers is very clear: on paper (82%). Mainly because it is easier to access (68%) and because consumers are used to reading it in that way (25%).

Given the above, it doesn't come as a surprise that a majority (76%) disagree with the suggestion of replacing paper leaflets inside drug packages with QR codes. 79% even think paper leaflets should be provided inside the drug package, even if there is an alternative QR code. Respondents felt this would otherwise disadvantage older people (81%) and would make society too dependent on the internet (70%).

Some opportunities for introducing QR codes

Despite the reluctance to abandon the paper version of drug leaflets, there are also some cautious first signs, mainly from more educated and younger consumers, that they would prefer the digital option.

On average, 35% of respondents indicated that in their case QR codes would be very useful, even going up to 43% in Italy and Spain. Indeed, there are some real opportunities for QR codes to bring tangible value to consumers in terms of readability, easy access, and impact on the environment:

- 69% think the font size on paper leaflets is too small and 55% find that the information about the expiry date printed on the package is blurred, barely visible, and overall hard to read.
- 61% agree QR codes are better for the environment than paper leaflets.
- 29% tend to throw away the leaflet during the treatment after reading it, mainly because they are not easy to reinsert in the drugs recipient/box (51%) or because they think they won't need it anymore (45%), which might turn out to be a problem if side effects were to arise.

QR code is a strong complementary tool, not an exclusive one

Information about products and their characteristics are an essential safeguard for consumers' health, rights, and interests. That's why improving the readability and comprehensibility of drug leaflets is an absolute must.

Undoubtedly, digital information tools, such as QR codes, have the potential to improve the availability and convenience of product information and the capacity to reach consumers effectively. Nevertheless, access to physical copies of important information 'on' or 'with' the product is still necessary for various reasons, namely the need for equal access, the risk of excluding more vulnerable consumers and the need to provide immediate information. This is even more true when it concerns medical-related information, where a lack of information could immediately impact consumers' health.

Euroconsumers survey data on drug leaflets reflects that broader society is not 100% tech fluent yet in QR codes and needs to have important information available to them on paper. But it equally points out interesting opportunities for the future and concrete cases where a QR code could truly benefit consumers. That's why adding a QR code to the paper drug leaflet would be a welcome idea, but replacing it absolutely not.

The debate about paper versus digital shouldn't be an exclusive one - it should be a complementary one. Digital tools, coupled with physical product information, can provide consumers with the easy and immediate information they need, while offering the added value of more detailed, convenient and interactive information offered by technology. Balancing the best of both worlds would be truly serving consumers' needs.

About Euroconsumers: Gathering five national consumer organisations and giving voice to a total of more than 1.5 million people, Euroconsumers is the world's leading consumer cluster in innovative information, personalised services and defence of consumer's rights. We work closely together with Consumers International to ensure consumers are safe, that markets are fair and benefit from honest relations with businesses and authorities. Our European member groups are also part of the umbrella network of BEUC, the European Consumer Organisation. Together, we advocate for EU policies that benefit consumers in their daily lives.

[\[1\]](#) The survey was carried out simultaneously in Belgium, Italy, Portugal and Spain, capturing overall 4.247 valid answers. Data was collected between June and July of 2022 through a paper questionnaire and sent out to a representative sample, based on the latest national statistics of each country. In Italy and Spain, an additional online questionnaire was sent to reach enough answers. Results (weighted by gender, age, educational level and geographical distribution) can be considered as representative trends for the national populations.