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Marketing strategies used for alternative protein products sold in Australian supermarkets in 2014, 2017 and 2021

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One in three Australians are consciously limiting their meat consumption to some extent. Designed to aid in the transition to a plant-based dietary pattern, alternative protein sources that are presented in similar formats to conventional animal-based protein sources (such as burger patties, sausages and nuggets) are becoming more commonplace in retail food environments.[1] Marketing plays an important role in consumers' perceptions and acceptance of new foods. However, the increased adoption of health-related food labelling used by manufacturers to emphasise the positive nutritional attributes of their products is concerning some health professionals. The purpose of this study was to investigate the marketing strategies used for alternative protein products available in Australia in 2014, 2017 and 2021. Product data were extracted from FoodTrack™, an established database of packaged supermarket products developed by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation in collaboration with the National Heart Foundation of Australia. Each year, product data were collected from four major retailers in metropolitan Victoria (Australia) from 2014. Marketing strategies investigated were product description, front of pack labelling claims, price, and in-store placement (2021 only). Categorical data were described using counts and percentages. Across the product range ($n = 292$ products), 'burgers' ($n = 86$), 'strips' ($n = 51$) and 'sausages' ($n = 42$) were the most common product formats, accounting for ~61% of the product range. Nutrient content claims featured on 273 (93%) products. 'Positive' nutrient claims (those highlighting the presence of a nutrient) occurred on front of pack labels four times more than 'negative' nutrient claims (those highlighting the absence or low levels of a nutrient; 432 versus 101, respectively). Protein-related claims were the most common 'positive' nutrient claim ($n = 180$, 62%), and cholesterol-free claims were the most common 'negative' nutrient claim ($n = 72$, 25%). Health claims on front of pack labels were less prevalent ($n = 28$ products, 10%). Most products ($n = 265$, 91%) mentioned a dietary pattern (such as 'vegetarian' and 'plant-based'), or a combination of dietary patterns on their front of pack label. There were some differences in how products were marketed over the years, for example, 'plant-based' claims were only made on the front of pack label of products collected in 2021. Between 2014 and 2021, on average, the pack size decreased (14% decrease, $p < 0.001$) and the unit price increased (9% increase, $p = 0.035$). There was inconsistency in product placement across the eight stores visited; some products were positioned near conventional meat products, whereas others were in a separate area in the supermarkets. This study provides a useful evidence base to understand the marketing strategies applied to alternative protein products. Research investigating their influence on consumer purchasing behaviour would complement this work.

Reference

1. Apostolidis C & McLeay F (2016) *Food Pol* **65** (C), 74–89.