

One-Time Meal Labeling: a Solution Providing Meal Identification, Food Safety, and Nutritional Information

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Brief Description:

At Meals On Wheels, Inc. of Tarrant County, we affix a 4" x 6" label onto every one of our meals; this label provides information about proper reheating instructions, the nutrition facts, the daily menu, and the delivery date. As our clientele grows, the demand for information like this is increasing, and the meal label is one way that we can meet that demand.

Attached is an example of our meal labels, showing the reheating instructions, delivery date, menu, nutrition facts, and the meal label.

This submission was selected as part of a national challenge issued to leaders in all communities seeking new "best practices" and "best possibilities" for the future of nutrition and aging.

In July of 2010, Meals On Wheels Inc. of Tarrant County (MOWI) began using a brand-new system to label the meals produced in our kitchens. Prior to this date, pre-printed film that listed "Menu A" or "Menu B," along with reheating instructions, was used to differentiate between our choice meal entrée selections. In addition to our clients having a choice between entrées, our clients also have two different diet options: the regular selection or the no concentrated sweets/diet selection. To determine which meal was regular and which was diet, each meal was circled with red permanent marker if it was a diet menu option. This created some unnecessary confusion and meal shortages with our volunteers which, in turn, made some of our clients upset because they did not receive the meal they wanted. In response to this, we began searching for a new way to label our meals that was clearer, more legible, and easier to understand.

In addition, we also wanted to be able to provide our clients with more information about their meals. Many of our clients suffer from impaired memory or neurological conditions, which can make it difficult to remember what meal you picked or when you put a certain meal in the refrigerator to save it for later. Additionally, many of our clients also need to monitor their nutrition closely, making the nutrition data a necessity. Based on the need

we were seeing amongst our clients, we decided that in addition to the meal selection and reheating instructions, we wanted to list our daily menu, the delivery date for the meal, and the nutrition facts for the entire menu that day.

The motivation for each of the additional meal label components was simple: provide the most information we can that will be of greatest use to our clients. Our daily menu needed to be on the label so our clients could know what entrée and sides to expect when they pulled back the meal film. The delivery date needed to be listed so that if a client put a meal in the fridge or freezer, they would know what date that meal was from and whether it was still safe to eat or not. Finally, our nutrition facts for the meal, including beverage and sides, needed to be listed to provide our clients with the nutritional analysis on the meal they were eating that day. Information like the total carbohydrate count, the sodium content, the total grams of fat, and the amount of calories in each meal is important to our clients who have conditions like diabetes mellitus and hypertension so they can more effectively manage their nutrition and health status.

As soon as we began using the new labels, the immediate positive response was tremendous. Our clients called reporting that they loved the delivery date most of all; it gave them the reassurance that our meals were fresh and confidence in being able to estimate an expiration date. They raved about the menu being listed on the label so they knew exactly what they were getting in their trays. We received positive remarks regarding the nutrition facts label, and some of our diabetic patients noted that they now felt very sure about how the meals would affect their blood sugar. Above all, our clients noted that this meal label was a huge improvement over the pre-printed film, and provided much more detailed knowledge about the meal.

Our meal labels have been a very innovative project for us; at MOWI, we were one of the first to implement a meal labeling system, and several other Meals On Wheels groups in Texas have now followed suit due to the positive reception of our labels. As our baby boomer population begins to reach 65 years or older, they will demand this kind of information so they can make wise decisions regarding their food choices. At MOWI, this is only one of lots of innovative projects we have going on to meet those demands, and is only one of many more to come.