EU: Language Requirements for Product Labels

U.S. Commercial Service Germany

Summary
Using the appropriate language on product labels is vital to ensuring consumer understanding of a product’s use, safety and environmental impact. There are currently 23 official languages in the European Union (EU) and the European Economic Area (EEA). The use of language on labels was addressed in a 1993 Commission Communication, the subject of which was to encourage multilingual information, while preserving the freedom of Member States to require the use of language of the country of consumption. Language requirements are a national issue in which Member States determine the appropriate language/languages necessary for labels on products in certain industries. Below is a list of each Member State’s general language requirements for labeling. This information can also be found in specific Country Commercial Guides (CCG). Links to these documents can be found on www.export.gov/(insert name of member state).

General language requirements on labeling by Member State

Austria
In Austria, language requirements for labeling and marking of products depend on the type of product and the intended use. For some product categories, especially those with a health or environmental impact, it is mandatory to label products in German. The labels must be affixed permanently to the product and be durable to withstand whatever type of care is indicated on them. Textile imports not complying with Austrian labeling requirements may not be allowed entry by customs. Generally, the shipper or importer has three weeks to correct any labeling not in compliance or to apply for re-export or storage in a bonded warehouse. Failure to take any action within the three-week period is subject to heavy penalties and possible confiscation. The importer bears the responsibility to ensure products are certified and properly marked before they are offered for sale.
There are a few exceptions to take into account. For instance textile or food products do not necessarily need labeling in German. Furthermore, the three weeks period to correct labeling is only valid for textile products. However, this period is more of a general approach than a strict regulation. For other products the labeling has to be corrected.
Listed below is the information for product categories in the health or the environmental industry:
• Requirement to be labeled in German
• Labels must be affixed permanently
• The importer bears the responsibility

Belgium
Belgium has three official languages: Dutch, French and German. All information which is
required to appear on labels must be in the official language of the region where the product is commercialized (if necessary, further requirements for specific products may be obtained from the importer). This is specified by Belgian law which states that all consumers of the targeted market must be able to read the product information. The language divide typically consists of Dutch in the northern half of Belgium (the region of Flanders), French in the southern half of Belgium (the region of Wallonia), and German in two small communities located on the Belgium-German border. Brussels is a bilingual city, thus all product labels must be printed in French and Dutch. At the retail level, all labels and indications, instructions and safety warnings should be bilingual in French and Dutch.

**Bulgaria**

Product information must be written in Bulgarian but it also should be noted that English, German, and French are acceptable languages. Labels must contain the following information in Bulgarian: quality, quantity, ingredients, certification authorization number (if any), and manner of storage, transport, use or maintenance.

**Cyprus**

In 1995, Cyprus adopted a strict law on the labeling of food products, requiring that the product name, ingredients, net contents, and country of origin be in the Greek language, in line with EU norms. A sticker on the product with a Greek translation is acceptable, provided it does not conceal the original label and it has the approval of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism. Compliance with this law has been mandatory for all food products since February 1, 1997. The “Safety of Consumer Products Law” of 1994 outlines the legal responsibilities of those involved in the production or distribution of consumer products requiring safety warnings (including household appliances, pharmaceuticals, and many other products). One of these responsibilities concerning the proper labeling and packaging of consumer products is to render them completely safe to the public. This includes having the necessary safety warnings for consumer products in Greek. The government has re-doubled efforts for stricter enforcement of the law.

**Area Administered by Turkish Cypriots**

Labeling and marking requirements are much looser in the Area Administered by Turkish Cypriots than in the Republic of Cyprus. For example, mandatory labeling in Turkish is not a requirement for imported products, as long as the label is in English or one of the other main European languages.

**Czech Republic**

Labeling and marking requirements for products depend on the type of product and the intended use. In general, however, labels must be in the Czech language and can be affixed to the product or on a leaflet attached to the product. These guidelines are regulated through the Consumer Protection Act 634/1992sb.

**Denmark**

As a general rule, consumer products must be labeled in Danish or in a language that differs from Danish only slightly in spelling. As a practical matter, this means Norwegian and in some instances, Swedish. All pre-packed foods intended for the final consumer or catering establishments must be in Danish.

**Estonia**

The following information, in Estonian, is required on the retail packaging or otherwise marked on
the product (a sticker, label, etc.): name of product (indicating clearly the contents of the package), name of manufacturer or name of the company that had the product manufactured, and amount of contents (weight or volume of the contents to be specified, measures in metric system). A retail size food package must show the name of the manufacturer, packer or importer, commercial name of the product, net metric weight or volume, ingredients in descending order of weight, last recommended date of sale, and storage instructions if perishable or intended for infants.

**Finland**
Labeling and marking requirements in Finland are based on the government decree related to consumer products and services. Mandatory information must be provided in Finnish and Swedish. The name and purpose of the product and the name of the manufacturer or importer must be marked on the product (a sticker, label, etc.), so the consumer or authority knows who to contact if necessary.

When applicable, the following information should be provided to secure safe use of a consumer product:
- Product contents and size of contents
- Batch number identifying the consignment
- Instructions for assembly and information if the assembly requires specific qualifications for safe assembly
- Instructions for use and storage
- Warning labels and instructions for the use of necessary personal safety device.
- Washing, cleaning and care instructions
- Instructions for disposal of the product and information on hazards for using the product and its disposal


**France**
A December 31, 1975 law made the use of French compulsory in the designation, offer, presentation, written or spoken advertising, the user manual or instructions for use, the description of the scope and warranty terms of a good or service as well as invoices or receipts.

The Act of August 4, 1994 and its implementing regulations have made the use of the French language, a fundamental element of the heritage of France. The purpose of the law is the protection of the French language; the obligations apply without any need to distinguish whether the buyer is an individual or a professional.

The use of French is compulsory in trade relations and labor relations, without, however, prohibiting the use of recognized foreign words or phrases. It is required in the documents relating to the sale of goods and services. Similarly, job offers in the press, labor contracts and other documents relating to social relations within the company are required to be written in French.

**Germany**
While there is no legal requirement stipulating that information on labels be in German, a German-language label is advisable in order to be able to effectively market a product in Germany. A label may contain information in more than one language.

**Greece**
Labels must be in Greek.
**Hungary**

Strict rules apply to labeling and marking of food, cosmetic and household products in Hungary. There are specific marking and labeling requirements for human and animal pharmaceuticals. The primary requirement for food is that labeling information must be in Hungarian. This involves placing a sticker printed in Hungarian over existing packaging. Cosmetics are regulated by the National Institute of Food Hygiene and Nutrition (OETI) and also must adhere to similar labeling requirements. Labeling must include approval symbols from this institution and contain the following information about a product:

- Clear identification of the products
- Net quantity
- Name and full address of producer or the importer/distributor
- Country of Origin
- Consumption expiry date
- Recommended storage temperature
- Listing of ingredients and additives
- Energy content

Special labeling regulations apply for the retail sale of food and some other products. Labels bearing directions for use in Hungarian – such as clear description or international signs for proper handling and/or cleaning instructions of clothes – must be attached to the individual packing. International signs for raw materials should be visible on shoes. Specific references on technical electric certificates issued by Hungarian authorities must be attached to the individual packing.

**Ireland**

According to the Constitution of Ireland (Article 8), while the Irish language is the national and first official language of Ireland, as an English-speaking EU-member state, labels and packaging in Ireland require the English language.

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