

Howard Frost and Vivien Wilton-Middlemass McCallum Layton

Sweet smell of success

When it comes to market research, businesses need to make sure that their new product is not a lemon – but, if it is, is it bitter or sour?

New product development usually treads a familiar path. Once the need for a product has been identified, there follows the concept development stage, where the product is tested and tweaked. It is at this point that marketing decisions are made, such as those relating to advertising platforms, launch details and distribution channels.

Because this process will be familiar to the reader, it is not explained in detail here. The intention of this article is to sharpen the reader's senses – because a marketer with acute senses has an advantage when it comes to product launches.

So, how can marketers be sure that the final product, of all the ideas tested during development, will be the most successful?

Well, if we accept the belief that everything happens for a reason, it follows that consumers will select a product over the competition if they have good reason to do so. Therefore, to give a product the best chance of success, one needs to accurately identify the motivations of its target market.

For example, some people buy dark chocolate, others milk chocolate. Aficionados of the former often describe it as more bitter tasting than milk chocolate, and cite this as one of the main reasons for their predilection. But what does 'bitter' mean? A company developing a dark-chocolate bar has a dilemma. Taste tests with



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Sensory testing and new product development go hand in hand; using it at various stages of the development process helps to ensure that the product matches market need.

For those unfamiliar with the basic technique, sensory testing involves the recruitment and training of a panel of experts who, through the use of consistent test stimuli, develop an appropriate and common language for a product or group of products.

Panels can be selected to test the taste of a product, whether it be margarine or beer; its texture, such as to check that a cosmetics brand is not too greasy; and its appearance – for instance, what is the optimum hue for a tomato?

Marketers must consider all the ways in which a product interacts with people's senses. For each connection, be it olfactory or optical, there is a potential role for sensory testing.

Sensory testing dovetails perfectly with research methods that seek to identify the motivations behind product selection. Together these techniques provide those involved in product development with a wealth of market knowledge. And it is this knowledge on which the best decisions are based.

Take a car manufacturer that learns its customers are likely to pay more for a model with doors that shut with a satisfying 'thunk' sound. This is only one of the myriad considerations of its customers, but the manufacturer would be somewhat remiss if it ignored this aspect when designing new models.

Finally, lemons. The reader might be surprised to discover that there are 47 varieties of this zesty fruit. Interestingly, growers classify their lemons as either 'acid' or 'sweet', but how many people ever ask their grocer for the latter? ■

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the public are all very well, but one person's 'very bitter' is another's 'a little bitter'.

What's more, the confectioner must also take into account the other criteria that influence chocolate-lovers' buying decisions, such as texture and shape.

The confectioner's marketers may wish a definitive metric of

bitterness existed by which to gauge their treat against rival products and the taste preferences of the target market. Luckily for them, such a metric is available, and not just for chocolate. Sensory testing can be used for any product that appeals to the senses. Every consumer product falls into this category.