

DISPATCHES FROM ADICT BY SIAL PARIS

Food innovation success demands consumer perception of benefits

By Lindsey Partos, 18-Nov-2009

Innovation can differentiate, generate new markets and create value in a competitive marketplace but to clinch the sale the consumer must clearly understand the benefits of a new product design

"True innovation in food and beverage designs should bring new benefits perceived by the consumer," Xavier Terlet from trend tracker XTC world innovation tells an industry audience at SIAL's innovation conference in Paris on Tuesday.

With a massive one out of two food and drink products to hit the European shelves actually removed within two years, bringing value and benefit to the consumer in the form of a successful product is a tough challenge.

For Terlet, innovative food and beverage products, whatever their shape and form, need to "bring a 'service' to the consumer," he explained to FoodNavigator.com.

In order to get a handle on the potential shape of these 'benefits', XTC identified two broad trend categories for Sial's Adict conference: 'Living in our time' and 'Responsibility'.

Our time:price, luxury dichotomy

In a financial crisis, there is a marked dichotomy between price and value for money at one extreme, with the ultra-luxurious and sophisticated at the other, with innovators pitching products to both ends of the spectrum.

Secondly fusion food, or the use of exotic ingredients, taken out their context and used in an innovative formulation. The mixing of 'genres' can bring added-value to the mundane with XTC citing the example of the Japanese ingredient wasabi. Traditionally eaten with sushi and sashimi, wasabi is now used to encase nuts and crackers in snack applications.

Stronger textures and tastes that are 'provocative', without losing a touch of sweetness, are also apparent, "such as the sweetness of honey contrasted with spices," suggests XTC.

New technologies - the internet and telephone - have brought new playful possibilities to the marketplace that help the ever independent consumer to control what he eats.

Shoppers, for example, can take a photo of a food bar code, and then obtain product information from the internet. Or in the US, says XTC, people can make their own M&M [chocolate coated buttons] product, with a personalised message on the packaging, such as 'happy birthday'.

"The consumer wants to be responsible for his or her choice," stressed Terlet.

And in pace with an increasingly aged population, packaging innovation today, and tomorrow, must take into consideration the needs of the older generation.

"There is enormous potential here," said the market researcher.

"Rheumatism, for example, can deform the hands of the elderly, making it very difficult for them to use certain food packages, such as sardine cans," added Terlet.

And reflecting today's clock-watching consumer, 'controlling the time' marks the fifth key area in XTC's 'Living in our time' trend spot.

Shoppers want to 'get rid of the tiresome tasks', leaving more time for pleasures. "For example, people might take 20 minutes at McDonald's: five minutes to queue up, but spend 15 minutes to eat their lunch," said the market researcher.

Pleasure, the primary sentiment for functional foods

Moving into the 'Responsibility' zone, respect for oneself, and the environment, marks this trend area.

The explosion of organic foods reflects this trend: initially private label now brands are getting on the bandwagon. Further, a type of cooking or food preparation that leaves the nutritional element of ingredients 'in tact'.

"By extension, this trend favours innovations based on fruit and vegetables that have a double benefit: natural and functional".

Exploring the soaring area of functional foods that is blurring the distinction between pharmaceutical and food, Terlet warning that innovations must first and foremost bring pleasure to the consumer.

"If a consumer has high cholesterol, they'll go to the pharmacy for some tablets. Pleasure is the primary desire for the food."

XTC notes that with a growing elderly population, innovations in this area are stepping up from heart health, osteoporosis and digestive ailments, to memory and cell protection.

Crucially, firms are using a dialogue *"less technical and medicalised"* in favour of natural, and sometimes exotic, ingredients, such as 'superfruits' and 'supervegs'.

A further key trend area that falls under responsibility is 'look and self control'. Consumers are eager to understand the product, and to easily identify the benefit for them.

Slotting into this new trend are innovations in weight control that focus on 'doses'. Cadbury launched a 100 calorie chocolate bar, for example, that effectively hands over responsibility for calorie intake to the consumer. Eating one, or several, bars, the consumer can clearly dose their consumption pattern.

And finally, headlining the 'responsibility' zone comes ethics. Once again, XTC stress that pleasure is a core impulse in consumption, but, they add, this should not be to the 'detriment' of others, hence the growing presence of fairtrade products on the shelves.

In step with this ethical attitude comes the growing awareness of the environment, and its fragility. Firms are today eager to demonstrate their sustainability credentials: *"In recent years we have noted the development of products that emphasise their CO2 levels,"* said Terlet.

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