

The Right Product for the Right Moment

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Bridging the gap between objective product qualities and the consumer's complex desires and needs

It is becoming more and more difficult to develop successful new products. Solutions that are optimally tailored to consumer needs and desires are the only ones that have a chance of market success. The demands of the buying public often differ significantly, depending on the context. Researchers from the European Sensory Network members' institutes ISI, Germany, and Matforsk, Norway, are on the trail of methods that can identify such effects.

If product developers directly question consumers concerning their wishes – they seldom come up with worthwhile answers. The reason: most often the consumers are either unaware of which aspects influence their preferences, or they have difficulty verbalising their perceptions. To be sure that the product complies with consumer taste, product developers aim towards the optimum taste qualities. Ideally, sensory experts and potential consumers would alternatively describe the product at different stages of the development process.

Yet sometimes this approach does not go far enough. The problem is a complex one, especially with products that are consumed under extremely variable circumstances. Along with taste and aroma, appearance, design, and expectations influence consumer satisfaction. Important are also the thoughts and feelings that the consumer associates with the product. What is the context of their thoughts during the consumption of a product – Sunday breakfast with the family, or on the hefty snack en-route? What recollections or associations does the product draw out – “a party with friends”, or “this is something that is healthy”? Do consumers have the same feeling about the product in diverse situations, or do particular circumstances enhance their enjoyment? Robert Möslein from the German sensory institute ISI in Göttingen says, “Usually there is no single ideal proto-type well-suited for every situation. Together with colleagues from the Matforsk Institute in Oslo, Norway, we have developed methods that incorporates the consumers' situation-specific expectations into the sensory optimisation process.”

In addition to the product profiling conducted by panels of both sensory experts and consumers, the sensory scientists have used different associative methods to evaluate various assortments of bread, cheese, and herb-flavoured liqueur, as well as typical consumption situations. Subsequently, the consumers evaluated how appropriate different varieties are for particular consumption situations. The Matforsk Institute's Margrethe Hersleth underscores that, “In this way, along with explicit expectations, we were able to uncover latent consumer needs, and incorporate the suitability of the product for a particular situation into our analysis.” For instance, in a bread study, it was found that consumers considered one out of seven types of bread to relate especially well to breakfast and lunch, while other sorts of bread were perceived more appropriate for dinner, soup and pasta. In a study on cheese two out of twelve types of hard cheese were considered to be especially suited as “light” (low in calories) cheese. Other sorts were preferred for breakfast, with an evening glass of wine, or when cooking. Usually it is possible to identify the sensory attributes that are critical factors in the “use experience”, i.e. the respective consumption situation. In the case of herb-flavoured liqueur, liqueurs with fruity citrus notes are preferred as party drinks, whereas they are

viewed as a digestive when they have a more aromatic base with a hint of mint. Möslein and Hersleth emphasize that, “Thus we can offer product developers concrete information above and beyond sensory analysis data and acceptance evaluations, that can be incorporated into their product innovations and modifications.”

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The European Sensory Network (ESN, www.esn-network.com) is an international association of presently 18 leading academic and research institutions in the field of sensory and consumer sciences.

ESN aims are

- to further the development and application of sensory science in Europe, e.g. by generating funds for joint research
 - to improve sensory and consumer testing methodology for the benefit of food and non-food industry, e.g. by rapid feed back on research results of practical relevance for the industry
 - to promote the application of sensory analysis in the industry; e.g. by inhouse trainings and seminars
- ESN members share their expertise in consumer driven sensory research and work towards standard methodologies.

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