



## Putting Sensory Science into the Marketing Mix

How Sensory Research Can Strengthen Marketing Strategies

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A Leatherhead Food  
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# Putting Sensory Science into the Marketing Mix

Cindy Beerens looks at how sensory research can be used to strengthen your brand through a deeper connection with consumers.

While budgets have traditionally been high for research to support product marketing, sensory product testing (how consumers respond to a product from a sensory perspective) has often seemed the poor cousin with limited investment.

It may seem strange that more money is not spent on understanding consumers' sensory reactions to a product. If the product doesn't at the very least taste and look good, then consumers are unlikely to purchase it again.

This discrepancy can be explained by the fact that marketing departments in food and drink companies have generally had bigger budgets for consumer research than technical departments. It is also fair to say the two departments often have rocky relationships and have unfortunately not found ways to share consumer insight successfully.

Over the past ten years, however, there has been a growing recognition among marketing professionals of the importance of getting the product right from a sensory perspective. Marketing professionals are also waking up to the powerful opportunities that sensory research offers them in marketing their product. In fact, it's spawning a whole new marketing discipline of its own: sensory marketing.

## **Marketing gets all 'touchy feely'**

Sensory marketing is a way to encourage consumers to respond to a product or a brand through the use of sensory cues. It is so powerful that it can create subconscious triggers about a product. Rather than tell consumers that your product is high quality (a statement that consumers are often dubious about), you can lead them to believe it through the sensory experience or journey.

There are five key areas to consider from a sensory perspective: vision, smell, taste, touch and hearing. Eating is one of the few human experiences which uses all of these five senses, so it is the logical step to use the senses when marketing food and drink products.

**Vision:** Before we even touch a product, we are judging how it looks and are making assumptions about its characteristics, from how we expect it to taste, to what we think about its quality.

Vision is such a dominant sense that it can deceive or trick the other senses. One phenomenon that illustrates this well is the consumer perception that the product flavour should correspond to the colour. In consumer testing, consumers struggle to guess correctly the flavour of a product if it is a different colour

to the one they expect. This is because the visual perception is so strong that it overrides

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our perception of taste. This has led sweet companies to play with colours and flavours, such as Skittles' 'confused' product which surprises consumers with flavours which do not match the colours.

The intensity of the colour also sends unconscious signals to the consumer. Consumers often assume a vanilla ice cream has a stronger vanilla flavour if the colour of the product is brighter. However, a note of caution should be raised here; if a colour is too vivid, consumers may question how 'natural' the product is. Leatherhead research shows 9 in 10 UK consumers think it is important that natural rather than artificial colours are used in food and drink products

The packaging, too, impacts perception. When Coca-Cola produced a limited edition white can for winter, some consumers thought the drink tasted different; they self-generated sensory attributes in response to the change in packaging colour.

**Smell:** The sense of smell has the power to transport you to another time or place, or even remind you of a particular feeling or emotion.

Food and drink providers use aromas in marketing to create powerful responses in consumers. For example, Nescafé have coffee-infused labels to tempt busy shoppers down the coffee aisle. We know how enticing it is to smell fresh bread wafting from a bakery, and many retailers have responded to this insight. M&M's flagship stores, for example, infuse the air with the aroma of chocolate.

Aromas are also being used in places you wouldn't necessarily expect – how about smelling freshly baked potatoes emitting from a poster or billboard while you wait for your

bus? Would that influence your dinner plans that evening?

**Sound:** Sound, too, has the power to transport consumers on a cognitive journey of association. Consumers perceive crisps to be crunchier and fresher if the packaging creates a satisfying 'crackly' sound. The sound of a can opening can gets the taste buds tingling in anticipation of a refreshing, sparkling drink. The 'snap' created by breaking a chocolate bar gives the impression of freshness. Other industries have deployed sound to great effect: car adverts demonstrate quality just by the sound of a car door shutting.

**Touch:** Who likes greasy crisps? The texture of a product in the consumer's hand or felt through cutlery and then finally in the mouth creates an array of associations and assumptions about a product. A firm apple is perceived as fresher. A changing in-mouth texture can be used to market a product: 'a crispy first bite with a creamy, melting centre and a lasting softness'.

The feel of the product packaging can communicate the quality of the product. For example, flimsy packaging which tears easily can lead consumers to question the quality of the product inside. The feel of the packaging can also communicate key characteristics of the product, for example a company wanting to highlight the natural ingredients in their product might choose a natural packaging, such as paper or wood. A product which is over-packaged or packaged in a material which is difficult to recycle can leave consumers questioning the company's commitment to sustainability.

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**Taste:** The taste journey actually kicks in before the product has even been purchased. Marketing has always used the language of taste and flavour to convince consumers to purchase products, using words such as ‘tangy’, ‘chocolaty’ or ‘savoury’.

They have also used sensory-derived data on pack, such as ‘8 out of 10 consumers thought our product tasted best.’ One growing area is sensory claim substantiation, where sensory dimensions are tested with consumers in order to make a sensory claim about the product.

### Sensory claims coming to a pack near you

The sensory claims used by manufacturers in different countries is an interesting lesson in cultural relations. Sensory claims made in the US tend to be bolder than in some European markets, while some of the claims made in Asian markets are strongly geared towards enticing, sensory descriptors.

Two of the most significant sensory-related claims, as far as recent NPD activity is concerned, are ‘improved taste’ and ‘longer-lasting’ flavour.

To substantiate ‘longer-lasting flavour’, a particular set of sensory methodologies called temporal methods are used; these explore how the sensory profile of a product changes over time. This is particularly important for products or ingredients with an aftertaste, such as sweeteners, or products with changing flavours, such as chewing gum, coffee or wine.

The industry is watching developments in temporal methods closely. At the forefront of these developments, Leatherhead has created a temporal methods initiative to keep members

up-to-date. If you are interested in learning more, please contact the [Insight team](#).

### Taking ‘liking’ to the next level

If you thought sensory and consumer research was just about product characteristics and product liking scores, then it’s time to find out what it can really do for your product and brand. It can deliver answers to questions like these:

- Do consumers associate your brand with a particular sensory experience?
- How can you use sensory cues to market your product?
- How does your product marketing (e.g. packaging, advertising, brand) affect your consumers’ sensory experience?
- Which product attributes are driving consumer liking?
- How does the setting or context where the product is consumed (at home, out-and-about) impact consumer liking?

Sensory science adds an extra dimension to traditional consumer research, enabling food and drink providers to develop a deeper connection with consumers and ultimately create a stronger brand and greater product differentiation.

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## **How Leatherhead can help**

Talk to us about any consumer and sensory challenges you are facing with your products. Leatherhead's experts can help you meet your business requirements using the appropriate and latest consumer and sensory tools.

Get in touch with the [Insight team](#) if you would like to hear more about the temporal methods initiative mentioned in this white paper.

## **About the author**

Cindy Beeren is Vice President of the Consumer, Sensory & Cooking Instructions department at Leatherhead Food Research. The team of 50 Consumer, Sensory and Cooking Instructions experts deliver consumer insight studies, sensory trained panels, provide consultancy and research into sensory & consumer techniques and generate cooking guidelines. Cindy is a Food Marketeer by training (Food & Business, Hogeschool Zuyd, Heerlen, The Netherlands), a chartered scientist and a registered sensory scientist.

## About Leatherhead Food Research

Leatherhead Food Research provides expertise and support to the global food and drink sector with practical solutions that cover all stages of a product's life cycle from consumer insight, ingredient innovation and sensory testing to food safety consultancy and global regulatory advice. Leatherhead operates a membership programme which represents a who's who of the global food and drinks industry. Supporting all members and clients, large or small, Leatherhead provides consultancy and advice, as well as training, market news, published reports and bespoke projects. Alongside the Member support and project work, our world-renowned experts deliver cutting-edge research in areas that drive long term commercial benefit for the food and drink industry.

Leatherhead Research is a Science Group (AIM:SAG) company. Science Group provides independent advisory and leading-edge product development services focused on science and technology initiatives. It has six offices globally, two dedicated, UK-based R&D innovation centres and more than 350 employees. Other Science Group companies include Oakland Innovation, Sagentia and OTM Consulting.

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