



The dream team for successful product development

Blending science and consumer insight for pioneering product development

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The spotlight has never shone brighter on the food industry than in recent years. Pressure is coming from all angles to make food healthier, more sustainable and taste better, but how can these all be achieved at the same time? In this white paper, Stephen Morley examines how new start-ups and established players are reacting to these challenges and considers how successful product development comes from a unique blend of science and consumer insight.

Food suppliers and retailers are constantly trying to innovate and optimise their products to meet new trends in the industry. A key challenge is keeping up with the changing consumer. Gone are the days, for example, when only vegetarians ate meat substitute products, or only those suffering from coeliac disease would think about picking up a gluten-free cookie or muffin. The fact you now have high profile sports stars appearing on adverts for meat-free sausages and burgers demonstrates the extent to which the meat-free diet or the gluten-free diet has become mainstream.

Instead of a small number of consumers eating 'free-from' products due to allergies or intolerances or because they hold particular ethical or religious views, many more are now choosing them as a lifestyle choice. As part of a project recently, Leatherhead Food Research asked 603 consumers, all of whom have no known food allergies or intolerances, which products they buy/consume on a regular basis. The results confirmed the changing consumer behaviour, with 345 (57%)

answering they buy vegetarian/meat free products along with 197 and 194 (32%) stating they buy dairy free and gluten free products respectively.

New kids on the block

One change to the market recently is the rise of companies selling solely 'free-from' products. No longer do we need to rely on companies who manufacture 'regular' products, making variants of their originals, we have many companies whose sole focus is making these alternative products.

As a result of the new entrants to the market, the whole sensory experience of eating these foods has improved dramatically. The flavour of the free-from products are beginning to compete favourably with the original versions of the products, and perhaps more importantly, the texture is starting to mimic the standard products. Add this to a favourable appearance and you have a similar eating experience, so why not make the swap? The only hurdle left is the price difference, but in time this will likely reduce too.

One question you may ask, is how are these new start-ups going to attract the customer base of the established players in the market? Sure, the sensory experience is important, but, when it comes to initial purchase, many other factors come into play. TV advertising has always been powerful, but can small start-up companies compete with the budgets the big boys have? They probably can't afford an Olympian to head their campaign!

Well, thanks to social media and the proliferation of internet-enabled digital devices, companies have never been closer to the consumers they want to talk to. They can deploy social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, to reach their consumers and engage them with relevant messages to generate excitement about a product and demonstrate the company's brand values.

The empire strikes back

The more consumers are exposed to new products, the greater the likelihood of purchase. As a result, the consumer base of the original versions of products is under threat, so how are these companies responding?

The established players in the market are fighting back with innovative versions of their original products which stretch the category in an attempt to differentiate their products and take a larger share of the market.

We are, for example, seeing companies developing 'functional' products which give the product additional characteristics or unique selling points. Companies are looking at opportunities for fortifying their products with relevant vitamins and minerals. Others are exploring the opportunities for making health

claims on their products. The inclusion of protein in products is becoming increasingly popular to meet consumer demands for healthy products on the go, making consumers feel full for longer and helping them avoid unnecessary snacks. A number of food companies have recently released variants of their products that have a higher protein content than the original, which enables them to make a 'high protein' claim. Smaller versions of original products can give consumers a mini treat of what they love with lower calories compared to the original product. Then there are the opportunities to repurpose a product for a different market, consumer or eating occasion, something which Mondelez is praised with doing with their Belvita biscuits.

Next generation new product development

Understanding the needs and wants of the consumer remains the priority for the food and beverage industry and while the marketing channels are more fragmented than they have ever been, the opportunities to engage with consumers are also greater than they have ever been. This means companies do not have to innovate in the dark – they can innovate hand in hand with their consumers or co-create with them.

Leatherhead can help you reach your consumers, using our national database of consumers, understand how they respond to your products from a sensory perspective and then identify from a scientific perspective which properties of that product are driving consumer liking. This unique blend of consumer insight and scientific knowledge of ingredient functionality means marketing teams and new product developers can not

only understand what consumers like about their product, but understand exactly why they like it – which ingredients are driving liking? How are ingredients interacting to create the desired texture of the product? How does the flavour develop in the mouth? It ultimately takes the guess work out of innovation and reformulation and means developers can be confident that they are taking a product to market which hits the consumer button while utilising ingredient interactions to maximum effect.

How Leatherhead can help

With Leatherhead's ever-growing national database of consumers, insight into any product category has never been more accessible. Central location tests, home use tests and online surveys are all available, with targeted recruitment to allow you to speak to the exact consumers you need to.

Get in touch with the Insight team if you would like to hear more insight@leatherheadfood.com

About the author

Stephen Morley is a Principal Scientist in the Applied Research team at Leatherhead. He works with clients daily, organising sensory and consumer projects and then running the subsequent analysis. He also delivers both sensory and statistical training courses and offer statistical support to his colleagues. Stephen has a foundation certificate in Sensory Science, along with an intermediate certificate in statistics and graduated from the University of Portsmouth with a BSc in Economics and Finance.

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 Food Research is a trading name of Leatherhead Research Ltd, a Science Group Company.

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About Science Group plc

Science Group plc offers independent advisory and leading-edge product development services focused on science and technology initiatives. Its specialist companies, Sagentia, Oakland Innovation, OTM Consulting and Leatherhead Food Research, collaborate closely with their clients in key vertical markets to deliver clear returns on technology and R&D investments. Science Group plc is listed on the London AIM stock exchange and has more than 350 employees, comprised of scientists, nutritionists, engineers, mathematicians and market experts.

Founded in 1986, Science Group was one of the founding companies to form the globally recognised Cambridge, UK high technology and engineering cluster. Today Science Group has two dedicated, UK-based R&D innovation centres in Cambridge and Epsom, and additional offices in London, Boston, Houston and Dubai.

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