

Title: ‘Just taste this – what do you think?’

Purpose of Paper

This paper explores how the sensory attributes of local food brands contribute to brand meaning. It is part of a wider study exploring the tangibility of brand meaning of local food brands. Through the development of a conceptual framework derived from Hirschman’s ‘layers of meaning’ (1980; 1998), research was conducted with consumers living in Dorset, UK. This study has a specific sensory focus, revealing that taste was the most dominant sense, with consumers going to some length to describe their tasting experiences. Taste may operate in a direct sensory capacity (afferent) and connect with other senses and associations in a multi-sensory (efferent) capacity. Consumers accept the notion of sensual incongruence.

Methodology/Approach

According to Hirschman (1980; 1998) tangible attributes can be “seen, touched, heard, tasted or smelled” and “arise directly from the product” (p.9). Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) introduce the terms ‘afferent’ and ‘efferent’. Afferent literally means something that is directed towards a nerve or organ but they used it in parallel with a direct sensory experience such as a product taste test. Efferent means to head away from a nerve or organ and this was paralleled with a consumer response when experiencing multisensory impulses, aligning with their hedonic perspective. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) assert that consumers perceive and encode a perfume’s scent, for example, and can react by generating their own internal images. These may be multisensory experiences such as sounds, tactile sensations and sight. Direct sensory is a term used by Hirschman in 1998 to describe her initial layer of meaning (see figure one) and refers to the tangible product attributes (see figure two).

The objective of this study was to explore the direct sensory attributes of local food brands. An interpretivist approach was adopted, enabling respondents to take a holistic view from their brand experiences, media and marketing sources, history and interactions with one another in order to imbue local food brands with meaning (Brown et al., 2003). The sample consisted of 25 households and was centred around three food fairs and six retailers committed to promoting local food brands. Defra's 2008 segmentation study into local food consumption was used to select households. This suggested that 'Devotees' buy local foods frequently and 'Persisters' make an effort to buy based on the perceived positive attributes (Defra, 2009). Consumers could be then categorised as Devotees or Persisters using a simple screener and were recruited for the study. Data was gathered through consumer-focused, ethnographic methods including accompanied shopping trips to food fairs and local farm shops, kitchen visits and in-depth interviews (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003).

All discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, then analysed thematically using Nvivo 10 software. Braun and Clarke (2006) recognise that this thematic coding approach is a distinctive method with an accompanying set of procedures. Themes were identified in a 'top-down' fashion and two in particular emerged, relating to the sense of taste and sensual congruity from consumers' consumption of local food brands.

Findings

The findings demonstrate that taste is mentioned the most. Respondents thoroughly engaged with trying to describe the taste as illustrated by Hilary (45-54 years, Devotee) at a food fair, trying to describe the taste of Comins Tea.

H: ".....for some reason I can't find the words to.....distinctive! Authentic!.....No. I'm still not sure there's enough for me to go 'oh'.

I: What does it taste like?

H: Powdery. It doesn't taste powdery- it's not got a powdery texture, but you know there's a taste of powder. It's got that taste. Does that make sense?"

Many of the consumer comments focused on just the taste element and respondents went to some lengths with their descriptions. They focused on trying to accurately depict the taste, and adjectives included 'smoky', 'flavoursome', 'saucier', 'creamy', 'earthy', 'rich', 'zingy' and 'blue'. They were single-mindedly trying to concentrate on this one sense and used far more elaborate descriptors than sweet, salty, sour, bitter and umami that are the five separate cellular and biochemical reactions to taste (Krishna, 2012). This suggests a direct sensory, afferent approach albeit using more sophisticated descriptions.

Respondents did not seem influenced or conscious of other senses and associations as exemplified by Carrie (55-64 years Devotee) when discussing Felicity's Farm Shop's fishcakes.

Carrie: "Just particularly these? It's taste - yes they smell fishy but they, it's the taste they actually taste of fish rather than just synthetic or potato.

Interviewer: okay and do they remind you of anything?

Carrie 2: No? [laughs]

Samantha: Does it not remind you of Seatown?

Carrie 2: No. ...no..[laughs]"

Respondents focused on taste, taking trouble to find the right adjectives for their descriptions rather than overtly bringing in the other senses or associations to help out. This contrasts with Krishna (2012) and Spence (2012) who suggest we use several senses to evaluate taste. Taste here is clearly the most important sense - a lead sense. This suggests a fit with a more afferent

position (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982) as respondents were in a direct sensory situation although not a clinical testing environment. Some efferent experiences emerge in terms of intensity and pleasure (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) evidenced by Hilary when experiencing the Woolsery cheese. This is more than a simple afferent position and it requires further exploration of whether afferent and efferent are at different ends of a spectrum and whether the demarcation between the two is muddier.

There were some clear examples where sensual congruency was present involving several senses in addition to taste. Steve (55-64 years, Devotee) commented on Fudge's brand of local biscuits:

"It's got to be the taste. I mean you open the packet and the first thing is the aroma and the second thing is the taste and the texture and then you know you have got something special"

This was not always the case, however, and interesting incongruent examples emerged from consumers' rich descriptions of local food brands and their engagement with taste. Rebecca (35-44 years, Devotee) compared the appearance to the taste.

"The Black Cow vodka is really rich and it actually tastes creamy. I know that sounds really bizarre because it's vodka and it's also transparent. But it tastes really creamy, it's smooth. You know the difference between drinking a blended whisky and drinking a 30-year-old single malt, it's kind of like that. It's got a richness to it. Creamy. It's lovely"

Again taste was emerging as a dominant sense and congruity with other senses did not seem important. Whilst it sounded 'bizarre', the Black Cow Vodka's taste was 'creamy' yet the vodka was 'transparent'. Hilary (45-54 years, Devotee) recognised that Woolsery cheese had

a really unattractive appearance yet its taste was described as ‘amazing’. This sensual incongruity was usefully summed up by Jilly (54-65 years, Devotee) who said:

‘...whereas in French supermarkets you've got big things and these smaller things and slightly damaged things. They don't care about perfection and uniformity; they care about flavour. Whereas we seem to value perfection and uniformity and the way things look over variety and taste. I think that's the wrong way round.They were saying to you ‘taste it’ because they know that's the way you're going to buy it, as opposed to here where they just put some wax on the skin, and that's a completely different way of valuing things. I don't know where we lost taste and variety over visual qualities. All this stuff that turns up in French markets, every day, you've got little blokes who are producing their own little cheeses which frankly look pretty unappetising, but oh my god when you taste them they taste fantastic. We don't seem to be prepared to take that leap’.

This contrasts with many scholars’ findings partly summarised by Stach’s (2015) useful assessment on congruency effects with associated networks, especially as they argue that multisensory compared to unisensory experiences create more intense consumer reactions. Calvert and Pathak (2015) recommend that sensory clashes be avoided as our brains are good at categorising a multi-sensory experience as a single integrated phenomenon. More senses in harmony with one another is greater than the sum of any individual senses and an incongruous multi-sensory experience decreases consumers’ liking for a brand. Yet within this context of local food brands, the taste is so good it over-rides any unattractive or incongruous appearance.

Theoretical Implications

This study explores how relevant Hirschman's framework, developed over thirty-five years ago, is today in understanding brand meaning. There are sensorial theoretical implications that include the notion of a direct sensory or afferent perspective and its relation to an efferent position. Sensual incongruity contributes to brand meaning. Meaning is all about patterns of relationships and the pattern may not be uniform. Creating dis-harmony causes the pattern of associations to become more distinctive and enriched. Congruency may not be necessary as it's the pattern of associations, not their consistency, which creates meaning.

Practical Implications

Defra (2009, 3) notes the growing demand for local food led by consumers, based on positive attitudes and perceptions. This study supports the importance of local food brands – particularly the sensorial tangible attributes perceived and experienced by consumers - as an area of potential growth delivering benefits to local retailers, producers, and consumers. Understanding 'taste' as the dominant sense that may encourage consumers to try and buy local foods supports the value of tasting and sampling products as part of the overall promotion of these brands.

Limitations

This study is limited to one geographic location within the UK, using local food brands specific to that area. It has a small sample and is based around understanding their experiences. Some findings and implications may be specific to this study only although arguably some of the theoretical underpinnings and research methods could be relevant to other locations and contexts.

Originality/Value

This study explores the direct sensory tangible attributes of local food brands mindful of their interplay with intangible associations from a consumer perspective. It adds to a growing body of brand meaning literature and this is the major contribution of the paper. It's highly topical and one of very few interpretivist studies into tangible attributes using ethnographic methods.

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Keywords

Brand Meaning; Local Food Brands, Sensorial Brand Attributes.

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