

# THE UNSUSTAINABILITY OF SUSTAINABILITY

SUSTAINABILITY HAS BECOME AN EXPECTATION OF CONSUMERS, BUT HOW WILLING ARE THEY TO PAY MORE FOR IT AND HOW MUCH DOES IT REALLY AFFECT THEIR PURCHASE DECISIONS? BY **ROBIN DE ROOIJ**, SENIOR RESEARCH MANAGER (SINGAPORE) AND **SOURABH SHARMA**, SENIOR MANAGER (US), SKIM GROUP

**CONSUMERISM** sustains the food industry, yet consumption, by its very nature, is unsustainable. However pure the intentions, the information overload surrounding sustainability in food threatens to become its undoing.

Ask the average grocery shopper if they understand the terminology being hurled at them. You will hear that 'sustainable' is a mission, not an indication of quality or taste; 'natural' has become a dubious phrase; 'organic' is purity sans taste; and 'green' is simply jargon.

With so much scepticism, how does one market to consumers, who by all counts are genuinely seeking more authentic food products?

Sustainability is most certainly not a fad; it is an expectation. Consumers expect brands to be good stewards of the environment, careful with the animals we consume, and genuine in their concern for human health.

A third of consumers look to product labelling for environmentally friendly evidence, and a growing number

exhibit a strong interest in sustainable lifestyles. Although consumers have an expectation of sustainability, and prefer to focus on natural and organic ingredients, these attributes can ultimately affect the taste and cost of the product.

How can food brands communicate and deliver sustainability in a meaningful, enlightening and compelling way without undermining the fundamental offering?

Through a meta-analysis of claims across a wide range of categories, including foods and nutritionals, it is discovered that the majority of consumers find sustainability concepts appealing, but not to the extent of driving purchases.

On-pack messages that focus solely on the sustainable or green aspect of a product are significantly more appealing compared to messages that highlight only product benefits.

Unfortunately, differentiation can be short-lived in a world where every company is jumping on the



bandwagon. Maybe even more importantly, the ultimate moment of truth happens at the point of sale, and we are learning that messages that focus only on sustainability are noticeably less effective at driving purchase behaviour than those that highlight product benefits.

There are many ways—some more effective than others—that a food brand can project sustainability:

- **A HEALTHIER LIFESTYLE**

Western consumers are increasingly choosing natural products as part of an overall healthier lifestyle, while in many Asian markets, this has long been a fundamental part of food and shopping.

Natural ingredients are considered healthier, which is why multinationals like Unilever focus on partnering with sustainable certified producers for their raw materials.

- **A COMMITMENT, BUT NOT A DRIVER:**

Sustainable efforts—whether working with local farmers to deliver organically sourced ingredients or supporting an international organisation—are often perceived to be something that every company should do, but largely irrelevant as part of the purchase decision-making process.

At the end of the day, taste is the most critical and subjective element, and often overrides other aspects.

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- **A MISSION:**

Many companies have sustainability built into their DNA. Consumers expect companies to be ethical and sustainable without having to think about it too much.

It is only when a company clearly breaches that expectation that consumers push back. Many of the world's leading brands have experienced consumer backlash regarding unsustainably sourced ingredients.

For example, Nestlé was pushed to switch to environmentally friendly palm oil after a social media guerrilla campaign against the use of palm oil that causes deforestation.

- **A PRICE TAG:**

Green, organic and sustainable products are generally expected to be more expensive. This can be a reason to tone down the sustainable claims, especially when targeting the large pool of lower income households in developing markets.

Brands will need to evaluate the trade-off in marketing sustainability of products and being able to compete at the right price point. At the same time, a growing middle class demanding high quality products is showing that they are willing to pay a price premium for natural products.

#### 4 TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING SUSTAINABILITY

- **RE-EMPHASISE TASTE**

Over and over again, it is found that in food categories, the key driver is taste. Despite notions that food brands should differentiate, the distinctions may be better portrayed in visual and media campaigns.

The fundamental of any consumer directed message should always be related to taste. Any opportunity for a brand to tie sustainability to improved taste is valuable and should be leveraged.

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An on-pack claim must be centred on something important to consumers and make a clear value promise that will drive purchase.

For example, ice cream made with real vanilla beans and organic red bean paste in dessert foods both imply elements of improved taste. A potential claim for these could read 'Creamier texture with sustainably harvested vanilla beans' or 'A richer taste with organic red bean paste.'

- **PUT THE KEY BENEFIT FIRST; THEN TIE 'SUSTAINABLE' TO IT**

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An emphasis on sustainability may not be as motivating to consumers, but such claims are not generally rejected in totality. This provides an opportunity for marketers to make such claims more meaningful by tying the sustainable element in with a key benefit of the product.

Does it make it fresher? Tastier? Healthier? For example, pointing out 'Fresher taste from sustainably sourced oats' is more compelling than 'Made with sustainably sourced oats,' since it ties the appealing benefit to the reason to believe and puts them in order of priority.

- **BE SPECIFIC BY BEING SIMPLE**

Sustainability can apply to various facets of the manufacturing and production process. To be clear and appealing to consumers, it is key that food manufacturers distinguish what the sustainability applies to: the process, the ingredients, or simply, the company philosophy.

For example, a cereal manufacturer may harvest oats from sustainable sourcing via local farmers, while a dairy producer may incorporate sustainable processing standards in the creation of products.

The differences are clear, and can contribute to different benefits: potentially better taste with both, or a better texture of product, or simply a more wholesome and healthy combination.

Unilever's ice cream division, as well as breweries such as Asia Pacific Breweries, focus on carbon footprint reduction. And Old Chang Kee recycles its used cooking oil and converts it to biodiesel, used by its own mobile shops.

By being specific about which aspect is sustainable, sustainability is no longer a vague promise, but becomes something tangible to the consumers that they can relate to.

- **PICK RELEVANT STIMULI TO INFORM CONSUMERS**

Sometimes one can emphasise sustainability without leveraging claims. If the claim addresses taste, other elements can address sustainability.

Successes can be found in pointing out sustainability through an on-pack sticker, a clear package ('you can see the ingredients') or in other advertising mediums.

The claims writing process is becoming increasingly challenging in a world where consumers are inundated with stimuli and information in every possible context. While it is always recommended to focus a claim on a key benefit, brands must learn to creatively synchronise elements of environmental ethics and sustainability with a promise of taste and value in order to impact consumer decision behaviour.

