

Making the Taste of your Brand fit the Chinese Palate

As everyone knows the Chinese market for western consumer goods is absolutely exploding. In food products they have local brands which are well established but most of these deliver against their traditional taste experience. They do not address the new needs created by the leading western food and drink products. Also as individuals become more wealthy in China so the attraction and cachet of the “imported brand” grows exponentially.

This means that you will be introducing your brand into a food and drink market-place that you do not understand. This will produce sales results, largely irrespective of your marketing efforts that do not appear, on the surface, to make very much sense. In a slow developing economy being the “First Mover” into the market-place normally guarantees quite a strong and long period of sales growth. But this is not true in China where the world’s leading brands are all arriving amidst a cacophony of possibilities. This means that brands that are not the “First Mover” into the market are judged on their relationship to firstly, the taste palate of China and secondly, the learnt taste palate created by the First Mover.

Perhaps I should explain this? The first mover/arrival that creates a new sector, say chocolate biscuit(s), also becomes a standard consumption experience and educates the Chinese palate that this is the chocolate biscuit taste. It is also a mistake to assume you are dealing with one country, the situation is more akin to the US where preferences vary across the country and indeed, in China they almost vary across centuries of development. Shanghai is almost a western city yet billions of people in China have a taste palate back 100 years. Also do not make the mistake in thinking that this palate will be the same as Thailand or Malaya, or indeed Russia. The palate is significantly different.

In over 68 projects in China we have learnt that you need to fully understand two issues in order to fit your product to this massive market. Firstly, you need comprehensive insight into the build of the Chinese palate through their food availability, and the methods of feeding children. These lead onto family eating and the variations for the different Need States, which tend to be very similar to our Need States, in terms of their psychological requirements.

Secondly, you need to understand the movement from the arrival of the First Mover into the market-place from the west and how this has been incorporated into the taste palate so that it is now accepted as a “local taste”. Be aware that every time you find a First Mover has made good progress there will be local cheap versions of this product, not in branded terms but in taste terms, readily available which will be under-priced, under-quality but chipping away at consumer usage – further altering the palate!.

Let me give you a few insights to get a feel for the size of the problem. Once Chinese children are weaned, and there are very few local baby milk formulas available, the first next taste will be rice. A child will be drinking water taken from cooked rice and this will begin the life-long love affair with the rice taste. Shortly thereafter rice itself, in highly softened format and often using specific rice variants, will be fed to the child. Thereafter this will contain other local vegetables, minute portions of meat or fish.

The sweet palate is dealt with by fruit but very often in dried format, thus enabling fruit to be available around the year but this again will be often mixed in with the cereal which will reduce its intensity and make the taste much more subtle, kind and to a western palate pretty elusive.

Fruit juices will be drunk, but watered down, and locally dependent on supply but sugar is much available, salt is extensively used to significantly enhance taste and nuts are an important ingredient of diet bringing richness, some fats and sweetness to the palate.

A thing to keep in mind is that large quantities of anything other than rice, are not available so the diet consists of a multitude of ingredients against a rice background. Textures are therefore generally soft which means that anything that is crisp is treated as something very special indeed, as it acts as a major contrast. Wheat is, to all intents and purposes, irrelevant and rice does not easily form a crust. If wheat is used it is almost entirely used to produce cake.

Milk and dairy produce are around but not in substantial quantities. Yoghurt is its main format as this is reliable and relatively safe but butter is largely unknown, margarine does not exist, ice-cream is almost a new discovery and cheese is nearly absent.

Therefore when you look at your brand and its taste characteristics that is the learnt experience and taste palate that the consumer 'brings to the party'. This is so far removed from the western experience that the chance of them liking your product, just as it is now, are really very low.

Your brand or its competitors if they were first to market.

Therefore the first product in the market-place for a western food has major difficulties in terms of the consumer's reaction but they will try it as it is seen as a substantial imported luxurious product which they are all anxious and eager to trial. This means that innately good tastes, and there are a number of tastes around the world that nearly everybody likes, have got a chance of doing well.

However they simply will not react to it in the same way and view it entirely through the prism of their learnt taste experience. If you look at coffee, you would imagine that they would give this a trial since they are so used to tea, but again their tea is not the same as the tea we drink. Coffee is not seen as a powerful product useful to keep you going, it is seen more as an occasional luxurious drink, it is not even available in the same format, the packaging is not the same, it sells in sachet not jars. This gives you just a small insight into the huge difficulties of entering this market-place.

So in summary, this is a massive and exploding market-place. If you do not take your brand there others will become established and you will never get in. If you do take your brand there do not expect it to work as it stands now. MacDonalds make their offer and the only thing that the people really like are the thick-shakes. Even meat products are different, they utilise meat in different proportions entirely to the west, sweet indulgent products are seen entirely differently, and our tastes are always too strong, too dominant. If you want to go into this market learn about the taste palate and see how your product can fit in and evolve it so that it has a chance.

The Marketing Clinic has specialised for over 20years in optimising the consumption experience for most of world's leading food and drink brands, in Europe and the US. In the last few years their research work and client recommendations for the east has expanded very rapidly.