

The tricks of the trade with taste buds

By Adam Jones

Published: October 2 2003 18:22 | Last Updated: October 2 2003 18:22



Concern about obesity in western countries is putting increasing pressure on food manufacturers. Encouraged by their success in taking on tobacco companies, class action lawyers and health campaigners are desperate to find evidence that "Big Food" deliberately fuelled the over-eating epidemic.

In this atmosphere of looming confrontation, anyone would imagine that the last thing the industry would want to see is a book detailing the ways food processors can manipulate the taste buds of consumers to encourage them to eat more of a product.

Yet that is exactly what Thornton D. Mustard, a British marketing consultant, has produced with *The Taste Signature*.

Surprisingly, his book has been endorsed by senior executives from Coca-Cola and Danone, both giants of food manufacturing.

Far from being an exposé, *The Taste Signature* is a how-to volume aimed at people who want to sell more food and drink products and keep their brands relevant. It purports to explain "the emotional responses of consumers to the different tastes and flavours of the world's greatest brands".

Talking about the background to the book, Mr Mustard says it is the distillation of 20 years of research involving more than 22,000 people and 2,214 products in Europe, North America and Asia.

Although he is reluctant to go into detail about products he has worked on, he says they include Hula Hoops and Pringles crisps, Snickers bars, Diet Coke with lemon, Lurpak butter, Maxwell House coffee, Alpen muesli, Budweiser beer and Harveys Bristol Cream sherry.

Food companies will always seek to make their products more palatable. That is how they make profits, pay staff and grow. Better-tasting food is what consumers want, too.

However, the rise of obesity means food and drink manufacturers are operating in a climate of unprecedented suspicion that can stigmatise this instinct for continual improvement. You can sell food, society is saying, just don't be too conspicuously good at it.

This paradox has created rich opportunities for critics of Big Food. In arguing that food manufacturers can do better commercially by deepening their understanding of the mechanics of taste, Mr Mustard's book could give them an unintentional in-sight into the behaviour of its enemy, conscious or otherwise.

Part two of *The Taste Signature* may be particularly intriguing to food industry critics. "Manipulating Flavour for Marketing Advantage" explores how appearance, aroma and taste send subtle signals that need to be understood by a successful food manufacturer.

Visual cues are important, Mr Mustard says. But it is on the topic of "more-ishness" that *The Taste Signature* is most revealing in suggesting tricks of the trade. After a mouthful has been swallowed, there are "certain characteristics

which make people want to eat or drink more", Mr Mustard writes. For one thing, the food should leave a hint of aftertaste. "Another trick is to dry the mouth," he continues. "When the mouth is slightly dried, especially by acid, it causes salivation. This triggers the response to eat and as long as the taste is positive, the response is let's eat more of what we have just enjoyed."

Mr Mustard explains that lemonade does not taste of lemons because excess acidity can be an "enemy of more-ishness". "The minute you introduce the correct lemon characteristics and produce a quality product, you begin the process of killing off the possibility of its continual and excessive consumption. Grapefruit is never, ever more-ish."

Crisps work by concentrating their impact at the front of the mouth, with lots of crunch to distract the mind from other preoccupations. "Most savoury snacks are very short in their taste, very little occurring in the rear mouth because if too much is present there the taste will build. As that taste builds so satiation begins and a product stops being consumed. Not really an ideal format for a snack product. The snack should be capable of being eaten until doomsday."

Mr Mustard - who worked at Avon, Cussons and Wrigley before setting up a consultancy, the Marketing Clinic, in 1984 - says food companies were generally unaware of the precise way that they used taste and were surprised when he deconstructed their products according to the emotional responses they evoked.

The companies he has worked with did not deliberately encourage people to overeat, he insists.

"We have not bumped into an exploitative attitude at all. People don't tend to think that way. They think more of the ways of improving their appeal."

But aren't food manufacturers going to feel horribly constrained if they are made aware of the way they have been instinctively and unconsciously manipulating taste over the years?

Mr Mustard disagrees: "If you had a product that did give you worries about the way it was encouraging people to overeat or whatever, a smart marketer would produce a cleaner, fresher, more contemporary version of it and use their brand strength to encourage people to buy the more contemporary one."

One of Mr Mustard's assertions is that responses to tastes are usually learnt rather than instinctive, and, in some cases, consumers can apply a manual override to any manipulation attempted by the food manufacturer or retailer.

He says this is already happening with some fast food and will continue to happen - and, like people who have given up taking sugar in coffee, consumers will continue to shut out those tastes and form new allegiances.

"Certain foods and drinks will become more fashionable because they give positive messages and also demonstrate after you have used them that you are not putting weight on.

"Those tastes will become the ones that people learn to like. People will start rejecting the heavy tastes. They will look at the McDonald's burger with a different eye. I think you will find that happening with quite a few products."