

'Natural' is vital in UK's perception of healthy food, says new study

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A wide-reaching new study conducted by MMR Research Worldwide (MMR) reveals Britain's attitude and behaviour towards different food categories and healthiness.

Food categories perceived as natural are most closely associated with a strong health profile
Five profiles highlighting the UK's attitudes and behaviour to health have been identified: healthy, on a mission, hedonist, armchair worrier and apathetic.
Stevia must underline its natural origins

The public, at the behest of the food industry, continues to consume in excess of what is required. This is a global issue, with estimations stating that by 2030, 50 per cent of the world's population will be overweight.

MMR, a research agency specialising in the food, drink, personal and household care sectors, engaged 3100 consumers from across the nation to explore food category health profiles. The result is a map of the intuitive associations between 15 categories, from chocolate to beer, and 10 food attributes (sugar, sweeteners, salt, calories, healthy, energy, fat, protein, natural and fibre).

Natural as a proxy for health

In the research findings, 'natural' was the best proxy for healthy, being most closely associated of all the categories with a strong health profile. Further to this the five categories perceived as most natural were also considered the healthiest; bread, baked beans, fruit juice and smoothies, breakfast cereal and yoghurt.

Natural not only has the most influence on healthy, it also stands alone, not being linked to any other attribute. This is unlike other influencers intrinsically tied to health such as fibre and protein. The categories that most strongly reflected natural, fibre and protein were baked beans, yoghurt, breakfast cereal and fruit juices and smoothies.

Results also demonstrate that consumers are more convinced by the health credentials of products when the health property (such as natural, protein, fibre) is intrinsic to that product. Healthy is not associated with the reduction or removal of a property from food i.e. reduced salt, low fat.

Another finding of interest is that consumers perceive a category's energy association differently to its calories association; energy being closer to health, and therefore it is viewed more positively.

The reduced calorie message is often overused which could be to the detriment of an overall healthy profile. For example, if your product is naturally high in sugar then this can be translated into being high in energy, to protect the healthy perception, says MMR Research's insight director, Andy Wardlaw.

Consumers mostly define natural by what isn't in the product, no additives, no colours, no preservatives, no chemicals and no artificial flavours. Categories that are perceived as more natural or naturally higher in protein are also perceived to be more healthy.

Five UK consumer profiles, based in attitudes to health

A precision tool, Bayesian Networks, allowed the research team to divide the sample into five distinct typologies regarding attitudes and behaviour related to health:

Healthy (22%): believes in simple health messages, natural food and exercise
On a mission (22%): driven to improve health, sceptical of health messaging and least likely to drink, smoke and eat out
Hedonist (6%): smokes, drinks and eats out, no interest in GDAs, ingredients and health
Armchair worrier (18%): propensity to worry about health issues, but unlikely to exercise and have only lukewarm commitment to diet related health efforts

Apathetic (12%): no interest in health or health messaging

From these five groups, it can be said that three segments or 62 per cent of the population are health aware. Only two segments (44 per cent of the population) are health aware and motivated to eat healthily.

Our attitudes towards healthy eating are not based on ignorance, in fact the research shows that all segments understand the food attributes of the different categories, such as chilled ready meals being high in salt and calories.

explains Wardlaw. “It’s all down to motivation. Over half of the population is suffering from health message fatigue. They are fed up of hearing that one week red wine is good for you and the next week not. We have hours of interviews reflecting a mix of laziness, lack of willpower and people just making the decision to go about their diet in their own way.”

The sweetener debate

Stevia is now two years old in the UK and it has established itself as a low calorie, modern and healthier relative to sugar – it is however viewed as a fad. It falls short of matching sugar in terms of taste and a perceived naturalness. Underlining and promoting its natural origins would benefit Stevia.

The way ahead

“In a highly complex arena, made even more complicated by an array of consumer types and high levels of scepticism, MMR’s research suggests that accentuating the positive properties of a product appears to resonate more than messages pertaining to reduced salt, fat and sugar. To compete effectively in the health space is to be perceived as natural, and rich in food properties such as fibre and protein – even energy, if appropriate. That is where the communications opportunity lies – and less on the benefits of reduction,” concludes Wardlaw.