

POINT OF VIEW

Consumers: what do they want?

As a technical expert, the answer is always easy: what the consumer wants is exactly what your converting equipment cannot do without major investments which, of course, are not in your plans for the year! And even if these were in your plans, your supplier would deliver too late - only when the competition has it on the shelves before you!

Guy Goldstein

I would really like to point out one important thing: we have to distinguish between the modern world and the world that's moving towards modernity. One thing's for sure, and that's that, in some areas, an education program on the benefits of hygiene needs to be started up. The shift within a country from life on agricultural land to the city and the arrival of migrants forces us to reconsider what we retain as givens. These people are often confronted with a consumer world they don't necessarily fully understand. Thus the need for hygiene, education which has to start in school or in institutions where children are involved. These children will then teach their parents, their brothers and sisters, their friends, and consumerism will start. In these areas people do not yet know what they want - we have to teach them what they need.

IT IS IN FACT EXTREMELY IMPORTANT TO DISCOVER HOW TO SATISFY CONSUMERS, even though they are not the people you sell to directly. Your customer is usually the buyer from a supermarket chain or a wholesaler who will then distribute and sell your products. Yet the consumer is the one who will pull the product off the shelves and he or she will be attracted by your marketing push. It is the push-pull system which drives consumption. Through years of advertising in modern countries, many attributes are now taken for granted, like soft and strong for toilet tissue and strong and absorbent for kitchen towels and wipes.

Having hammered these facts into consumer minds, marketing needs to push forward new concepts and ideas: hygienic, kills germs, comfortable, fits your home, matches your decor... these are the features that are coming out of consumer interviews and comments. Consumers expect new news every time; they feel somewhat secure to be using the same brand as their grandmother did, but they now expect new attributes that fit their lifestyle. Since in many countries advertising has established some of the major characteristics, consumers now know exactly what to expect, and they don't want to be disappointed on those.

THEY ALSO EXPECT "NEW" TO HAVE A REAL MEANING, "stronger" to really signify an improvement and "more absorbent" to deliver that extra capacity. In many countries - but not all - advertising is being checked by a regulatory body or by angry competitors who attack false claims. Remember the "whiter than white" claim for a washing powder? I want to stress the importance of having an Research & Development strategy that encompasses not only the technical aspects of production but also the expectations transmitted by marketing. We need to watch what's going on around us because some of the ideas might be adaptable to your marketplace.

PACKAGING PLAYS A KEY ROLE, too, in identifying the product as do product color codes. Brand identification is a key that makes the consumer head directly to the shelf that contains your product, thus the need to rejuvenate branding from time to time but with enough links to the "old" design. We are no longer in a production-oriented business, but in a market-driven industry. Thus the need to understand what the consumer really wants and expects. Engineers are not defining the rules any longer: these rules are set by consumer demands and emphasized by marketing. Try and sell a 3-or 5-wheel car!

PRODUCTS HAVE TO BE DEFINED TO FIT LIFESTYLES. Brands still have a certain impact due to the implied quality and the publicity made over the years, which has created an image that remains in the back of people's minds.

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Yet brands need to innovate constantly: you can't live on the past, nor can you sustain the price gap with newly introduced brands or private labels. Today anybody with some money upfront can match the quality of any leader. Automation, computers, cognitive science and people's mobility have made it such that matching a leader is not an issue - just give them a short time to adjust.

SO WHAT DOES THE CONSUMER WANT? Millions have been spent in studies all over the world to define the needs and wants as well as the attitude towards innovations. It is easy to test new products, even on the marketplace, with a target group. Pilot plants exist where you can make a couple of thousand articles to be tested live by real people in everyday life. Consumer groups can be asked questions and confronted with new products, giving manufacturers ideas on how to perfect the offering before going market-wide, thus avoiding flops.

THE CONSUMER WANTS VALUE FOR MONEY, WHETHER THE PRODUCT COSTS 1 CENT OR 1 MILLION DOLLARS! The consumer now wants more green products from manufacturers committed to respecting the planet, products made from sustainable sources in companies where traceability is not just a word but a fact. Some countries are more advanced than others in this area but it is quickly becoming a major responsibility for manufacturers who want to export. There is no more 3rd World, there is only one world where we all live and want our children to prosper. The so-called "industrial period" has made a mess which we are now trying to clean up. The Kyoto, Copenhagen and now Cancun Summits have shown the need to do something, but few countries intend to do what's needed to protect our future - a complete failure in my eyes while the greed of the financial world goes on.

THE CONSUMER WANTS A BETTER WORLD with products doing what they are intended to do, no more but certainly no less. •