

Consumer Science lands in SA

 By [Danette Breitenbach](#)

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With emerging markets key to the growth strategy and investments that need to take place in the Middle East and African Region, Mondelez International has opened a new Sensory Laboratory in South Africa - the first in the EEMEA region. The global head of Consumer Sciences at Mondelez International, Marcia Young, was in South Africa for the opening. I caught up with her.

Mondelez International is a global snacking company with nearly 40% of its sales from emerging markets and globally the company is number one in biscuits, chocolate, candy, and powdered drinks. It is number two in gum. Its Consumer Science team (part of R&D) is the vehicle through which its product and the consumer are understood. There are over 100 people in the team globally with five colleagues in South Africa.

So what is it?

As a discipline Consumer Science or Sensory Science as some call it, is growing, but what is it? Young explains that this is a fairly new science, which only became an officially recognised field in the early '70s.

"The discipline began as a quality evaluation tool, evolving to sensory evaluation to what it is today: "a scientific discipline used to evoke, measure, analyse and interpret sensations and perceptions of consumers to products as perceived by the senses: sight, smell, taste, touch and hearing."

It is important because companies cannot afford not to understand what the consumer likes and dislikes. Today companies also have to do things faster than their competition.

Today a Consumer Scientist measures both the sensorial attributes of products through trained panels and acceptability of products through consumers. The most widely used scale for measuring food acceptability is the 9-point hedonic scale.

Sampling products

Developed in the 1950s at the Quartermaster Food and Container Institute of the US Armed Forces, the scale was used for the purpose of measuring the food preferences of soldiers. The scale was quickly adopted by the food industry, and now is used not just for measuring the acceptability of foods and beverages, but also of personal care products, household products, and cosmetics.



While the product's DNA is not negotiable, there can be variations in flavour, for example, to suit tastes in various countries.

The instrument of this discipline is the human and scientific and behaviour skills are used to sample products with consumers identifying what their dislikes and likes are. "In this way we assist in defining what the experience should be for a product," says Young.

There are two basic procedures the Sensory Laboratory conducts. Young explains: "We have trained panels that define the difference and similarities between product attributes. Products can have many attributes. So Cadbury chocolate has 56 attributes while chewing gum has 200. The panel finds, identifies, and evaluates the attributes through a methodology called descriptive analysis."

Likes and dislikes

In the second process, the consumer gives their likes and dislikes. "Both pieces of information are put together and analysed to pinpoint exactly what it is that makes that product the winning one. By identifying the product's specific attributes we can translate it into specifications for the manufacturing side," she says

"What we doing is interpreting the consumer through our products," she explains. "The connection of the consumer to the product is powerful and we specifically look at what emotions we are driving through this experience in addition to liking."

For example, the attributes of a product - such as its shape and size - drive the consumption behaviour of the consumer. "We then look at what emotions we create through a behaviour. In this way we can link attributes to behaviours to emotions and finally a joyful experience with our product," says Young.

'The DNA of a product is not negotiable'

Research is conducted on a global scale with global category teams focusing on a single category, for example, a single site working on gum and that is all they work on. While the work is done on a global platform, the knowledge is transferred into the various regions. Therefore, a trained panel works in one location on a specific product and data is then sent to a number of different countries to find out how many different formulations will be needed.

This is because the company recognises that consumers are not the same the world over. While all consumers might like chocolate, there are local preferences and nuances that need to be taken into consideration.

"The DNA of a product is not negotiable; its essence has to be maintained.

"However, there are variations in products. For example, the USA has a sweeter tooth than China when it comes to Oreo sandwich biscuits. Products can be tailored to countries or regions," she explains.

"We produce products consumers want and enjoy and we want to do this faster and better. [It costs] Millions of dollars to develop one product. Getting it right is our job," Young concludes.

ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from Wits.

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