

The Neophobia Paradox

Bored with the same old thing?

Bryan Urbick, CEO of **Consumer Knowledge Centre** was frequently frustrated by a phenomenon that he couldn't quite understand. When he worked with children to explore new ideas and innovations, "New! New! New!" was their stated desire. Many were "bored with the same old thing" and wanted "something different". Yet when those same ideas were tested, they failed to pass the hurdles.

"I want new!" versus "I want familiar!"

If I received £1 for every time marketing professionals told me young people are all about wanting 'new' and 'different' products, I would be a wealthy man!

For companies developing products aimed at young consumers – very young children through to adolescents – the inference is that they have to continually make products that are radically new and different from what is already available, or risk being surpassed by the opposition. The evidence for such a claim is mostly anecdotal.

Certainly, kids frequently express an interest in the latest technology, new clothes, even new foods, and they will often throw out hints that 'different' is what they want. But while they express this interest, their actual behaviour is very different.

While working with these young consumers to explore new ideas and innovations in a wide range of categories, they would generally tell us that they were bored with the same old thing and that they wanted a change. However, when we tested those same new ideas, they frequently failed to meet the criteria established to ensure success in the market place.

It wasn't until I discussed with and learned from Professor Patricia Pliner (of the University of Toronto) her research findings on kids' food neophobia that all the pieces started falling into place.

Neophobia is the fear of things new. Although young people may frequently claim to want 'new', in essence they are innately afraid of new things.

A familiar flavour can make kids more willing to try it

This neophobic behaviour can be seen in very young kids and is often still evident even as they mature into adolescence.

And this behaviour is not confined to children. Adults will also exhibit some degree of neophobia, often resorting to familiar and trusted brands and products that they feel 'safe' with. They are, usually, more willing than children to try new things although, interestingly, as we age into our 60s and beyond there is again a tendency to seek more familiar and

comfortable products, reverting to child like behaviour.

The paradox of neophobia creates a very real challenge for companies that market products to children. Marketers are frequently driven by a powerful desire to communicate a sense of novelty and uniqueness in their products, but to be successful they have to provide their formulations and forms in ways that are familiar.

A good example of where the product may have been right but the promotional delivery completely wrong was when St Ivel added Omega-3 to milk for kids. The advert showed fish being poured from a milk jug over a bowl of cereal, with a disgusted look on the face of the child. The interpretation of this (by children) was that milk tasted like fish and this perception generated an intense fear reaction in the children that observed it. For months we had mothers telling us that because of this advert, any product with an Omega-3 claim made their kids think it would taste like fish!

Combining something new with the accepted familiar is generally the most effective way of decreasing neophobia and increasing product acceptance – there is no shame in flavouring your new dairy innovation with



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the ever trusted strawberry, chocolate or vanilla. In fact, by choosing a familiar flavour with your new product, it can substantially reduce kids' fear and make them more willing to try it.

Other ways of reducing neophobic responses: showing children (of the target age) enjoying your product; increasing kids' positive exposures to your product (such as sampling); and be careful of frightening health claims but rather focus on the emotional or rational benefit to the child. And by all means, change the format or even the product itself, but be very careful about doing both at the same time. If the change is too radical there is an increased probability that fear and rejection will increase. ■

