Beyond Acceptance: Aligning Sensory Cues with Product Function, Emotional Impact and Acceptance

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Background and Introduction

For a long time, product development initiatives relied on consumer overall liking to strategically improve products. In recent years, however, many product launches failed in the marketplace even though hedonic performance was strong. In those cases, the product did not deliver against consumer expectations; brand image, product promises and product sensory identity were misaligned.

As consumers purchase products, they are not only seeking sensory satisfaction, but also product experiences that address their specific needs. Depending on context and situation, they may be looking for products that deliver more strongly against perceived efficacy, performance or other functional benefits, anticipated emotional impact or health-related added value.

In the present study, examples are provided that span both personal care and foods and beverages categories.

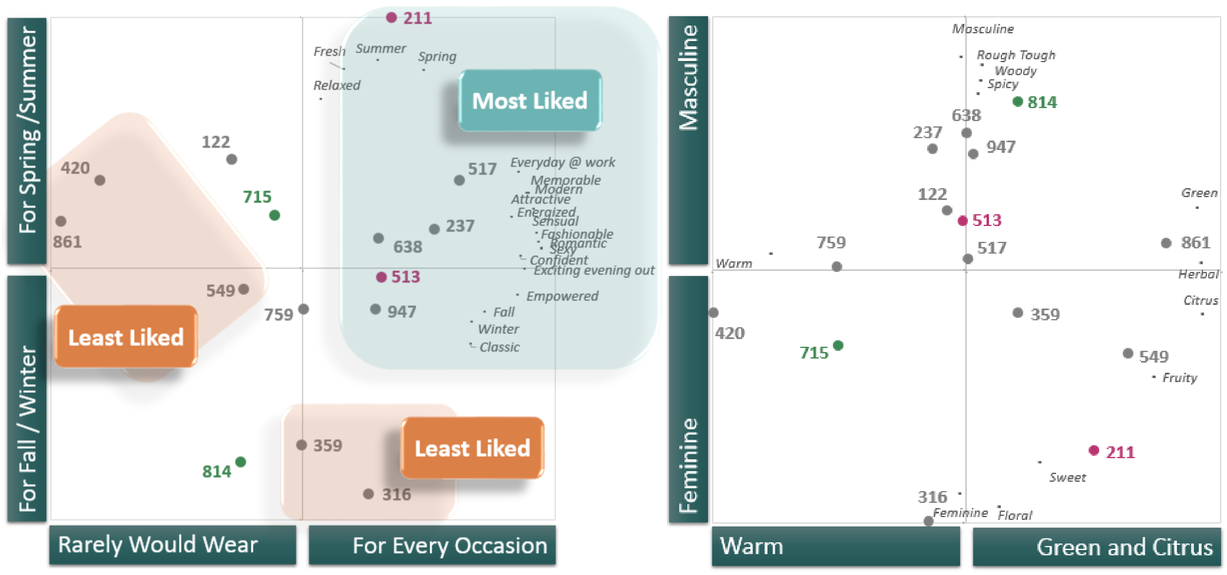
In some cases, products deliver similarly on overall liking but vary widely in sensory, imagery, functional and emotional profiles. In other cases, products differ significantly in overall acceptance but are associated with similar consumer-derived sensory, health, functional and/or emotional profiles. In both cases, differentiation is possible and success in the marketplace within reach if product positioning aligns with consumer expectations.

The important role of sensory cues in communicating benefits beyond hedonic value is discussed in that context.

Example 1 – Fine Fragrances

In a study conducted with 318 fine fragrance users, 15 fine fragrance samples were evaluated.
Results suggested products differed along four perceptual continua: Feminine vs. Masculine, Warm to Green/Citrusy, For Fall/Winter Use vs. for Spring/Summer Use, and Good for every occasion.
Overall, most liked fragrances delivered similarly on making one feel attractive, sensual, confident and sexy.
However, they also included:

- **BOTH** feminine (sweet, floral) **AND** masculine/rough tough (woody/spicy) fragrances.
- **BOTH** fragrances that were more relaxing, fresh, fruity citrusy and more appropriate for Spring/Summer **AND** fragrances that were warmer, more classic, more empowering and better for use in Fall/Winter.



Samples in PINK do not differ significantly from one another in liking.
Samples in GREEN do not differ significantly from one another in liking.



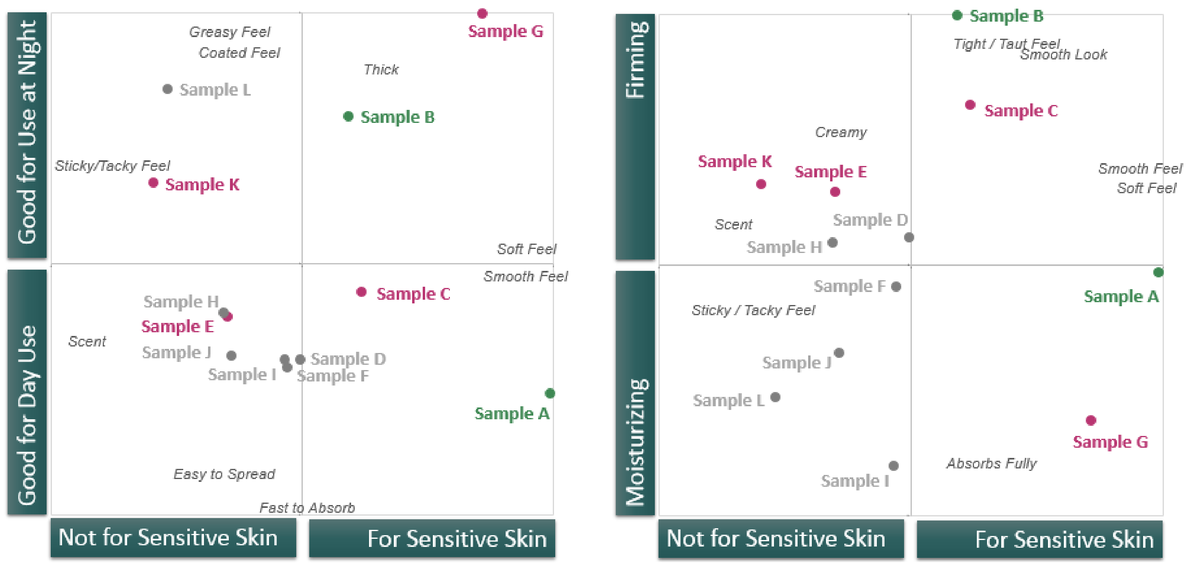
715 814 ** indicates significant differences (p<0.05)

211 513 ** indicates significant differences (p<0.5)

Example 2 – Lotions and Creams

In a study conducted with 116 users of the category, 12 creams/lotions products were evaluated. Results suggested they differed along three benefit continua: appropriate for day vs. night use; appropriate for sensitive skin; and moisturizing vs. firming/tightening benefits.

While differences in overall liking and overall perceived efficacy were noted across the 12 samples tested, some products were similar in liking and overall efficacy perception, yet delivered very differently on benefits and varied in their sensory profiles.



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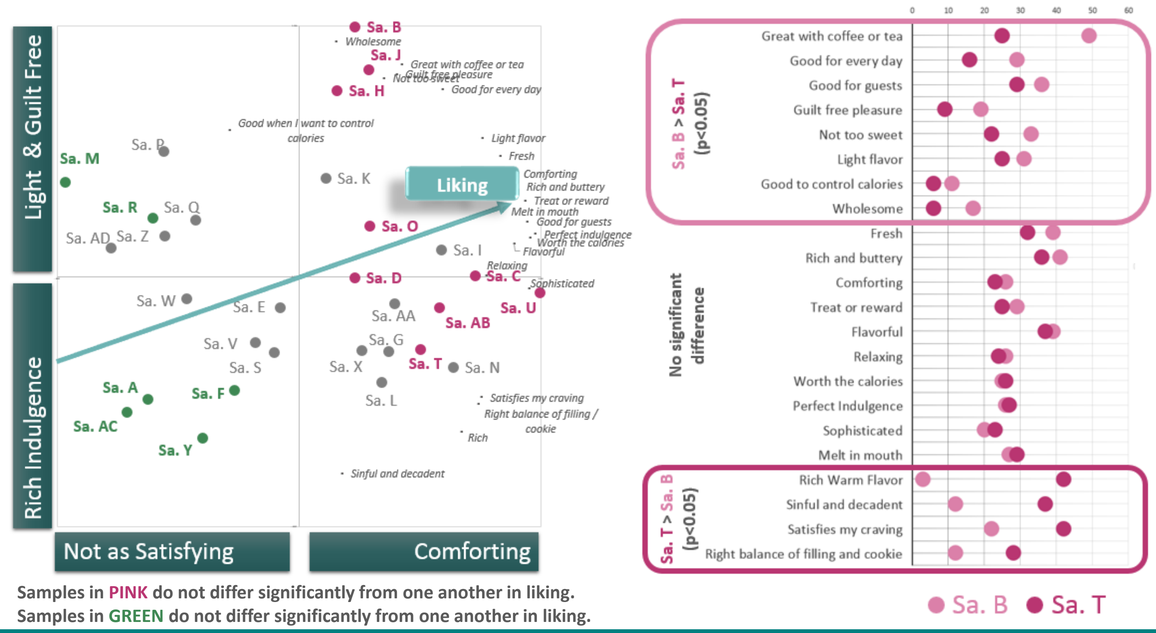
Samples in GREEN do not differ significantly from one another in liking.

Example 3 – Cookies

In a study conducted with 329 consumers, users of the category, 30 samples of cookies were evaluated. Results suggested they differed along two benefit continua:

- Satisfying & comforting
- Rich & indulgent to light & guilt-free.

While the satisfying and comforting continuum was strongly correlated with overall liking, the rich & indulgent vs. light & guilt-free was not, suggesting that products could be developed that would satisfy consumers similarly, yet offer different sensory experiences and meet different situational and emotional needs.



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Conclusions and Recommendations

- Building sensory cues consistent with brand promises and product positioning, in conjunction with delivering on liking, may ensure cognitive consonance in the mind of the consumers and justify product repurchase.
- When acceptance does not tell the whole story, product success may very well depend on building sensory cues into products that fully align with consumers' expectations for functional, situational and emotional benefits.
- Sensory professionals are encouraged to augment their methods to accurately ascertain, hierarchize and measure consumer needs and in turn identify the sensory cues that best deliver a consistent message to the consumer.

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