What Are Consumers’ Attitudes Toward Sweeteners

Tom Vierhile, MBA, Innovation Insights Director with the UK-based data management company GlobalData, gave a thoughtful discussion on consumer feelings about sweeteners that ended with a summary of unique future developments in sugar reduction.

He began his presentation, “Sweeteners in the Crosshairs: How Do Consumers Really Feel About Sweeteners and are These Feelings Changing?” by giving a brief introduction to GlobalData. He noted that it tracked innovation in over 50 markets to discover game-changing product trends through an organized trend framework that revealed eight mega-trends and 63 sub-trends.

“Globally, 54% of consumers are paying attention to the ingredients in their foods and drinks,” explained Vierhile. “Growing interest in ‘cleaner’ foods; rising worries about food allergies; and food contamination issues are making consumers more ‘ingredient-aware,’” he stated. Ingredient concerns tend to be much higher for products targeted to children.

Consumers are actively trying to reduce consumption of sugar and fat because of their perceived negative impact on health. A majority of consumers are either trying to reduce sugar consumption or consume it in moderation. Concern about sugar tends to rise with age, and consumers are increasingly linking sugar with weight gain. Obesity issues have escalated universally, and the U.S. leads the pack. Sugar taxes and education are seen as tools to change behavior.

“Views toward specific sweeteners are as varied as the sweeteners themselves; for example, agave, stevia and honey are seen as most healthful with just over one third of consumers globally saying each has a positive health impact,” Vierhile claimed.

Globally, aspartame is viewed more negatively now than high-fructose corn syrup. Sweeteners derived from nature are more likely to have a positive perception than sweeteners that are not. This explains honey’s health halo, with 77% of consumers globally (63% of Americans) believing honey has a positive impact on health.

But views toward honey and stevia are changing. Honey cannot escape worries about chronic health issues like obesity or type 2 diabetes. The positive “buzz” around honey may be easing because of these concerns. Stevia is in the opposite position as honey. Worries about obesity may be helping stevia, as consumers learn more about it. Not ingredient experts, a surprisingly high percentage of consumers globally say they are not familiar with the sweeteners xylitol, monk fruit, agave and erythritol.

Regarding sweetener claims, Vierhile stated that “little consensus exists.” No single sweetener claim emerges as the most attractive to consumers, as it is perceived that eliminating sugar comes at a cost, since sugar substitutes have their own issues.

Few differences are seen by consumers between “no added sugar” and “low sugar” claims. However, the “no added sugar” claim is viewed as appealing for younger consumers “when offered in a more natural state, and unsweetened products are perceived as more healthful, but lacking in taste appeal.”

Mixed results show that there may be no magic bullet for sweeteners. Replacing one artificial sweetener with another one backfired for Pepsi, as consumers wanting the original aspartame-based formulation rebelled. In Australia, Coca-Cola ran into resistance rolling out Coca-Cola No Sugar to replace Coca-Cola Zero (both with aspartame). Sugar reduction tends to focus on soft drinks and confectionery. However, many other categories offer reduction.

Women of all ages tend to be more concerned about sugar consumption than men, though concern levels by gender tend to converge with age.