

New formulation+ (a hint of consumer backlash)

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Background & Context



Big M is as Summer as beach cricket or burning yourself on the seat belt buckle when you get back in your car on a ridiculously hot day. To the untrained eye and the impulse loyal shopper, it would have been easy to miss the small blue flash on pack advertising the ‘Bigger Flavour’ of Big M.

Arnott’s Shapes, another stalwart of Australia’s favourite brands, experienced the same social media driven consumer backlash following the launch of the ‘New & Improved’ range of Shapes just months later. Arnott’s tried to calm disappointed, and at times angry consumers, by explaining

what had changed and the WHY behind the changes. It seems as though these explanations were not enough to calm concerns.

A change is defined as ‘an act or process through which something becomes different’ and in our experience is typically introduced for the better or at the very least, with the right intentions. We are yet to have a client tell us that they are looking to change a product to sell less of it. The part of change that we are most interested in is the WHY behind the change and just WHO is the change better for. More often than not, change in the product development sense is about cost reductions, raw material changes, supplier or even process issues. It is change bought about by necessity not change for the sake of improvement. This matters as most of the time, this type of change is not for the consumer.

We conducted independent research using our *Sensory Check* and *Final thoughts* methodologies to understand what was at the heart of this backlash to change that was afforded to the likes of Big M and Arnott’s Shapes.

Key research findings

Stage 1 of the research employed a blinded, sequential monadic sensory evaluation. Respondents were checked for allergies, health conditions and category purchase prior to completing the sensory study within the individual booth with overhead temperature controlled lighting. Samples were presented in a randomised order with a 3 digit identifying code to prevent order bias and are blinded unless otherwise stated. All liking and attribute questions are asked on a 100pt linescale with low and high anchors. Questions are answered using touchscreen computers.

The original BBQ Shapes are significantly more liked overall than the New & Improved BBQ Shapes which is primarily being driven by the significantly higher liking of flavour, spicy flavour and aftertaste in the Original version. The story with the Chocolate Big M samples couldn’t be more different to the Arnott’s BBQ Shapes. Whilst the Big M Original is liked more than the Bigger Flavour formulation, the difference is not significant. Equally, there are no significant differences evident between the liking of

attributes although the Bigger Flavour formulation is consistently less liked across each. In both the BBQ Shapes and the Chocolate Big M example, it is the Original formulation that achieves this benchmark, significantly in the BBQ Shapes example.

Stage 2 of the research employed a branded, sequential monadic sensory evaluation. The key difference to stage 1 is that consumers were presented with the packaging to review on screen as they tasted the product.

We see the same trend in the branded BBQ Shapes study as we did in the blinded BBQ Shapes study however it is more pronounced. The overall liking of the 'New & Improved' version is significantly lower than it was in the blinded study and the scale of liking for attributes is more pronounced.

Within the branded Big M evaluation, we see a significant change in reaction to the 'Bigger Flavour' variant with significant differences in overall liking and the liking of all attributes tested in favour of the Original flavour. Coupled with the minimal differences seen in the Blinded Big M evaluation indicates that objection to this change by consumers is more of an emotional reaction.

This was further highlighted through our *Final Thoughts* methodology where a number of key themes were identified such as skepticism about why the change was being made, an underlying belief that the changes in both products were due to unstated health or nutritional rating 'improvements' or ultimately that it was driven by nothing more than economic factors.

In conclusion

The two stages of our Sensory Check methodology show that sensory research is a complex matrix of considerations. We see that study design (the decision on whether to conduct a monadic or sequential monadic evaluation) is important as is the decision whether to test blinded or branded. These decisions and more depends on an array of factors including your research objectives, the WHY you are changing and the WHO will the change be better for.

Our independent research highlighted that brand love and loyalty of consumers play an enormous role to any changes being made to products and is often the core reason why there is backlash.

There is no instruction manual on how to make a formulation change, especially to a loved product with many loyal consumers however there are some guidelines about the potential impact for research that should be considered.

Want to know more?

This white paper is supported by a full length presentation that incorporates the independent research and experience of the researchers at pod research & strategy. We would be only too happy to organize a time to present the full version to you.