

Food eVangelists take the cake

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Recent revelations about the growing power and reach of 'Food eVangelists' - consumers around the world who critique products, share opinions and influence others - illustrate how vital it is that the food industry listens and responds to the voice of these potent agents of change.



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Gareth Pearson CEO of BMi Research says that the group, dubbed 'Food eVangelists' by global public relations company, Ketchum in its Food 2020 survey, is clearly highly influential but food companies and retailers need to engage with all their consumers - not only the very vocal groups.

'Food eVangelists' are typically young females who are active online, financially secure and have families. They utilise social media to generate up to 1.7 billion conversations about food every week and cover the demographic profile spectrum.

"In the South African baked goods industry for example, manufacturers and marketers have responded to changing consumer needs and the level of engagement is growing," he said.

BMi Research recently launched its Annual Quantification Report on Baked Products in South Africa which found that movement in the baked products market came primarily from the baked confectionery industry, with a strong surge in consumption of sweet treats. The BMi researchers also found that consumers were increasingly seeking out luxury baked goods - with market growth fuelled by improved retailing processes, more effective marketing and value-orientated pricing.

Pearson says this shift in demand for luxury items has forced greater levels of product and packaging innovation from independent bakeries as well as in-store bakeries in supermarkets and convenience stores. "Consumers are discerning. They want portability, ease-of-preparation and quality plus they want fresh products and fresh ideas and bakeries are having to respond imaginatively to meet changing demands.

"South African consumers clearly have a sweet tooth, but they are becoming increasingly perceptive about the quality, content and packaging of their baked goods purchases and in line with international trends, they are demanding greater involvement in the final preparation of the products. In response, we'll see changes in the packaging of baked goods with products such as cakes, cookies, muffins and pies reconfigured to include a DIY element for consumers, for example separate icing and toppings."

South African consumers weren't specifically covered by Ketchum's research, but Pearson says that the 'Food eVangelists' represent a global voice. "Online communication doesn't have boundaries and if what Ketchum said about this group is true, they are the single most important group in the food industry today and will change the food industry forever. As Linda Eatherton of Ketchum wrote on the company's website last month, 'the true leaders in the food industry are working to take the opportunity to totally re-imagine their relationship with consumers and reorganise and deploy resources to embrace and engage consumers as stakeholders.'"

Eatherton also said there was a sea change in the relationship between food companies and the consuming public. "And it's happening in South Africa too," Pearson added. "Certainly in the baked goods industry, we've seen producers respond to pressure with labelling changes, the release of many new products, vastly improved packaging and innovative merchandising strategies such as displaying baked goods near the check-out counters - an area traditionally reserved for chocolates and confectionery.

"Many supermarket and forecourt bakeries have evolved dramatically and they now compete effectively with specialist bakery shops, offering a greatly expanded product range that caters to the widely differing needs of their customers. The sluggish economy may have dented South African consumers' pockets, but it hasn't affected their taste for the sweet life. They're enticed by value offers such as 'coffee and cake' combo deals and they still like to treat themselves - despite the tough times."

So where to for the South African baked goods industry? BMi Research doesn't see radical change in the near future but it does see continuing evolution in terms of packaging, labelling and product innovation. "South African consumers are affected by global food issues and the baked goods producers are listening to them, learning and responding," Pearson added.

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