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*. . . I dream things that never were;
And I say, "Why not?"
-- George Bernard Shaw*

Mousetrap

The world will *not* beat a path to your door just because you build a better mousetrap. Especially when there are already a lot of good traps on the market. But a better product is usually the cornerstone of a successful marketing structure. Systematic improvement of a product can give you a better "mousetrap." And often at a lower cost to you. That's the kind of service to your buying public that opens the door to genuine profitability and wealth. And here's the blueprint for a better mousetrap.

Benchmark

The benchmark product is the starting point for further development. It has two characteristics:

1. It enjoys a good level of consumer acceptance.
2. It's composition and manufacturing are known.

Selection and development of the benchmark begins by surveying the field of available options of the product. Possible sources to consider: products you currently manufacture or have considered, competitors' products, cookbook recipes, products of fine restaurants, etc. From this field of options four or five items are selected that represent a wide variation of attributes: color, flavor, texture. These few items are then submitted for evaluation by consumers through focus groups and/or taste test surveys. This study results in an "ideal" product profile which can then be matched reasonably well in the test kitchen. This **Benchmark** product will have good consumer acceptance and a defined composition (from the test kitchen).

Optimization

Improving the benchmark involves making a list of all the attributes of concern: spices, salt, color, texture, gloss, cost, etc. Each attribute is then independently studied. For example: a series of products is prepared using the benchmark recipe but with varying salt contents. These products are then judged for acceptability (on a blind basis) by a small panel of consumers (8-12) recruited and trained for the purpose. By plotting acceptability scores vs. salt contents, the maximum acceptability or "optimum" salt content is determined. In all subsequent testing, this salt content is used while spices, etc., are varied similarly one at a time. In this way, each attribute is optimized.

Since changing one attribute may influence the optimum of another, after all attributes have been adjusted singly, the entire process is repeated to make final corrections for interactions between, e.g., salt and spice.

This process requires a great deal of test kitchen work and twice daily sessions with the trained panel, possibly for several weeks. The final result is an optimum product – at least in the opinion of the small consumer panel.

Verification

The foregoing process will result in a product with a high level of consumer acceptance. And it will probably be superior to other products in the original field of options tested. However, a major part of the development was a small opinion panel. For this and other reasons, it is a good idea to take the product into the market for a head-to-head test against the best of the original field of products tested.

The results of this large scale field test will either confirm the success of the development process, serve as the basis for fine tuning of the product or indicate that the “optimum” is in reality a new benchmark that needs further development. The usual favorable results allow finalization of the recipe and manufacturing protocol for your better “mousetrap.”

