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*“When we risk
no contradiction,
it prompts the tongue
to deal in fiction.”
-- John Gay, Fables, pt. 1 [1772] “The Elephant and the Bookseller”*

Condimentially . . . “Get a rope.”

Everyone involved in the production, marketing, distribution or sales of food products would like to think that they have the “best” product(s). But how can you tell which product is best? As an old adage says “a fool can ask more questions than a wise man can answer.” Despite extensive consumer research, taste testing surveys and the latest received wisdom, there may still be no satisfactory answer to the question, “which product is best?” Here we will focus on one major reason for this conundrum: context.

The marketing context

Every marketer deals with incredible complexity in the market. The facts of segmentation mean that any market, no matter how narrowly defined, will consist of a collection of distinct sub-markets. Each of these sub-markets is likely to have at least some slight differences in tastes. Therefore the “best” product has to be defined in the context of “best” for whom.

In addition to the product itself, advertising and distribution obviously impact success in the market. But advertising, through the creation of expectations also is part of the context of what is the “best” product. For example, a vigorous campaign of associating a brand in the consumers’ mind with the concept of “best” may mean that it is impossible for any product without that brand identification to be considered “best” by consumers. This is a marketer’s dream for the brand; and in some cases has come close to being achieved.

The consumption context

As seriously as the marketing context influences the definition of the “best” product, the consumption context may have a greater influence. Some of the factors involved here are:

- **Time.** For the individual consumer, what tastes good at one time, may not at another time. Time here could refer to the time of day, day of week, season of the year, or relationship to certain types of events. Will soft drinks go with breakfast? Or pumpkin pie become a major Fourth of July food?

- **Product experience.** Something may taste very good to a consumer initially, but tastes may be less attractive with further experience. Or the reverse may happen: taste for the product may be learned. Does everyone like caviar on their first taste?
- **Combinations.** A food may be very attractive in combination with some other foods and distasteful with yet others. And the relative proportions of each may radically influence what is “best.” Will cheese and jelly ever become a popular sandwich?

These difficulties become compounded when an effort is made to define “best” for a condiment. Consider trying to answer the question as to which of two brands of table salt is “best.” Certain characteristics (such as solubility or particle size) could conceivably influence sensory attributes of salt. But for two reasons it is unlikely that consumers would prefer one salt over another: (1) the issue would likely be considered trivial by most consumers and (2) if the salt is served in any type of realistic context, probably even experts would be unable to tell the difference between the two. These reasons derive from the fact that as important as salt is to sensory pleasure, it is generally a background influence and not the dominant feature of the taste experience.

Of course, a decision to be made in taste testing salt, or any other condiment, would be whether to taste it straight, or on something. This problem applies not only to condiments but to any ingredient that may make only a minor contribution to the overall taste sensation. Do you serve it straight to get the maximum effect of its strengths and weaknesses or do you dilute the effect, recognizing that a weakness may not be a weakness when diluted?

San Antonio vs. New York City

All of these problems came into play when an attempt was made to compare nationally advertised Mexican sauces. The market leader from San Antonio has pilloried an unnamed competitor from “New York City” as unworthy of customers’ acceptance. Although no national brand of Mexican sauces hales from the Big Apple, one is headquartered in nearby New Jersey.

Since there are no standards of identity for Mexican sauces, selection of the specific competitive products to be evaluated is somewhat arbitrary. Materials available in the New Orleans market during the 1988 Institute of Food Technologists convention were tested. Fifty respondents tasted the products as dipping salsas with unsalted corn chips. They rated the mild sauces: Pace Picante and Ortega Thick and Chunky Salsa. (See Figure 1.)

FIGURE 1. Consumer Ratings

APPEARANCE (%)	Score	Pace	Ortega
very attractive	5	12	20
moderately attractive	4	24	42
slightly attractive	3	28	26
slightly unattractive	2	28	10
very unattractive	1	8	2
Average Scores		3.0	3.7

AROMA (%)	Score	Pace	Ortega
very attractive	5	29	28
moderately attractive	4	33	34
slightly attractive	3	33	26
slightly unattractive	2	6	12
very unattractive	1	0	0
Average Scores		3.8	3.8

OVERALL (%)	Score	Pace	Ortega
like extremely	9	6	2
like very much	8	10	22
like quite well	7	24	18
like fairly well	6	20	24
like moderately	5	24	14
like slightly	4	8	10
dislike slightly	3	2	8
dislike very much	2	4	2
dislike extremely	1	2	0
Average Scores		5.9	6.0

HEAT (%)	Score	Pace	Ortega
much too hot	+2	6	2
slightly too hot	+1	30	6
just right	0	36	26
not quite hot enough	-1	20	40
not nearly hot enough	-2	8	26
Average Scores		+0.1	-0.8

FLAVOR (%)	Score	Pace	Ortega
excellent	5	4	14
very good	4	38	26
good	3	30	34
fair	2	22	22
poor	1	6	4
Average Scores		3.1	3.2

CHUNKS (%)	Score	Pace	Ortega
much too many	+2	0	6
slightly too many	+1	8	24
just right	0	16	58
slightly too few	-1	44	10
much too few	-2	32	2
Average Scores		-1.0	+0.2

Without considering the context, one can conclude that there are significant differences between the two products (95% statistical confidence). The nearer the ideal amount of vegetables and chunks. The Pace product is much nearer the ideal heat content. Balancing these factors, the respondents gave nearly identical hedonic (overall liking/disliking) scores to the two products. However, when asked directly to indicate a preference, there is a significant trend favoring the Ortega product.

PACE PICANTE SAUCE	40%
ORTEGA THICK/CHUNKY SALSA	60%

Respondents favoring Pace Picante Sauce cited its appearance, flavor and spiciness; they criticized the sweetness and aftertaste of the Ortega product. Those favoring Ortega were most impressed with its thickness. Although the Pace product was criticized for “runniness,” some favored it for this same reason.

Context sensitive issues that make application of any of this data to the marketplace hazardous include the following:

- The products were served as dipping salsas. Use of either product in other contexts, such as on tacos, could drastically alter the results.
- Neither product was identified by brand. In fact, any benefits of advertising, image, packaging, etc. were eliminated.
- The products were not served as part of a larger meal to allow true interaction of sensations.
- Interviewing was conducted at an exposition with no care given to match respondents with any intended or likely market.

With these substantial caveats, we conclude that the rope (“Get a rope . . .”) might be more appropriate for our friends from San Antonio.