



TOPIC: MARKETING AND SALES, PRODUCT INNOVATION, QUALITY

IN TASTE TESTS, CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

🕒 6 min read

What are people looking for when they choose a beer? Sure, we all know things like alcohol content or price play a role, but the obvious answer is that people want a beer that tastes good. Consumer surveys generally support this intuitive answer. Taste is typically cited as the number one factor when choosing a beer, often by a wide margin.[i]

This conclusion is both unambiguously, profoundly true, and...well, not as clear as it might seem. The reason relates to a well-worn phrase, often repeated by communication specialists, social scientists, and market researchers: context is everything. How people perceive the taste of a beer – or a hamburger, or a cup of yogurt, or a candy bar – has everything to do with the circumstances surrounding their tasting experience. And if you, as a brewer, want to evaluate consumer reaction to the taste of your beers, it would pay greatly to take this into account.

One such project involved evaluating an idea for a brand of beer imported into the United States. The owner was considering brewing the beer under contract within the U.S., since this could save a considerable amount of money on things like import duties and shipping costs. But the owner also knew that the brand's national origins were highly romanticized by its American drinkers. If those drinkers were to discover their favorite beer was now being brewed in the States, how would this influence their loyalty to it?

As part of the research process, beer drinkers who regarded this brand as their favorite were recruited to participate in a taste test in a central location. Each drinker was provided with two glasses of beer. One was the beer they knew and loved, brewed in the brand's home country, while the other was a test batch of the same beer, brewed in a facility in the United States. Or so they were told.

But here's what the participants were not told: both beers were, in fact, from the same batch, brewed in the brand's home country. The reason for this small deception is that the brewery wasn't really interested in gaging consumer reaction to the beer itself, but rather to the idea of brewing it outside the home country. Any differences in reactions to the two beers would therefore be a result of the context – the idea of a different source, and the idea only.

And the reactions were profoundly different. Many people who very confidently expressed the view that what they believed was a U.S.-brewed version of their beloved beer was – to be frank – utter swill. Meanwhile, the beer they believed to be imported was perceived to be every bit as good as it had always been. Again, these widely diverging opinions were driven by perceived differences in taste between two samples of the same beer from the very same batch – because context is everything.

These results may seem like some sort of aberration to many in the beer community. After all, brewery people, especially craft brewery people, tend to be highly discerning, and they may well assume that most beer drinkers share their sense of discernment. But two things should be made clear: first, the vast majority of beer drinkers are not as discerning as brewers or beer aficionados; and second, brewers themselves are far from immune to context-related differences in perception, because this is a very human trait.

Almost anything can influence an individual's perception of a beer's taste. Give someone two samples of the same beer in two different unlabeled cans, one blue and one orange, and that person will more than likely believe they taste different. Put two different labels, one from a popular and one from an unknown brewery, on two identical samples brewed in the same place and they will "taste" different. One study even found that consumers had very different perceptions of a beer's taste depending on the type of music that was playing when they tried it.^[ii] ("Participants liked the beer more, and rated it as tasting sweeter, when listening to music associated with positive emotion. The same beer was rated as more bitter, with higher alcohol content, and as having more body, when the participants listened to music associated with negative emotion.")

What does this imply for brewers who want to conduct some sort of consumer research to gauge reaction to the taste of their beer?

Ideally two separate but different tests should be conducted for any one beer. In the first test, the beer should be sampled and rated by drinkers in a context as similar as possible to the context in which they normally drink: in the taproom, with typical taproom music playing; surrounded by friends; and poured from the actual can or bottle in which it's sold, with the branding evident. This last recommendation may be surprising to many who've been taught that blind taste tests^[iii] are the way to go. A blind test ensures that people are reacting to the beer itself and not the brand.

But no-one drinks beer "blind" in the real world, and so the "real world" is the context we seek. And so the second test should be a blind taste test, which can be extremely effective as what market researchers call a diagnostic: if people don't like your beer in a branded test, is it because they really don't like the beer itself, or because the branding has excessively influenced their reaction? By doing a blind test after a branded test, we can determine whether the beer itself is the problem, or something about the branding. (Similar logic about diagnostics applies to the situation when people really love the beer in a branded test.)

So when surveys tell us that taste is the most important criterion when drinkers are choosing a beer, it might be best to modify the conclusion to address "perceived taste." No doubt many a brewer may be distressed to learn that the beer they brew is not the be-all and end-all of drinker preference. We're not saying the beer itself isn't critical, but it can't be emphasized enough that – as in much of life – context is everything.

By Mike Kallenberger, Senior Advisor, Marketing Insights and Strategy at First Key

[i] See, for example, <https://www.craftbrewingbusiness.com/featured/the-top-12-factors-consumers-consider-when-choosing-a-craft-beer/>, or <https://www.surveymonkey.com/curiosity/what-kind-beer-people-like/>

[ii] Not Just Another Pint! The Role of Emotion Induced by Music on the Consumer's Tasting Experience

[iii] For those not familiar with the term, "blind taste tests" simply refer to taste tests in which the participants are not told which beer they're sampling. The beer is typically poured into an unmarked glass, where the participants can't see.

RELATED CONSULTING SERVICES

Marketing and Sales