Roundtable  Olfactory Stimulation and Affect Intensity: Gender Differences in Yielding to the Enticing Aroma of Food?

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In spite of the competent marketing research already conducted in the area of olfaction (Sprangenberg, et al. 1996; Mitchell, Kahn and Knasko 1995), very little formal research has examined how consumers are influenced when exposed to the aroma of enticing food in a retail service environment (e.g., restaurants). Companies employ a variety of strategies to exploit the sensory arousal capabilities of the savory aroma of food products. According to Krause (1998), the aroma of savory foods is an underutilized marketing tool in the restaurant industry, and restaurants should realize that many foods “impair seductive aromas that entice consumers even before they taste the dish” (Kruse 1998, p.2).

Several important questions about the role of olfaction in marketing are yet to be explored. For example:

(a) Does the exposure to an enticing food aroma stimulate an affective response (e.g., desire and craving), which, in turn, stimulates an irresistible desire to consume the product?

(b) What is the role of affect in this process? Most of the research in psychology has focused on the role of the olfactory system in human memory and cognition (Richardson and Zucco 1989; Schab 1991). Other studies have examined how pleasant and unpleasant odors create affective experiences which ultimately function as mechanisms for the retrieval of happy and unhappy memories (Ehrlichman and Halpern 1988). However, what is still not known is the manner in which an olfactory stimulus itself produces a sensory arousal, creates affect, which, in turn, may intensify the consumer’s craving and desire to consume savory foods.

(c) Do individuals differ in the intensity of their response to olfactory sensations? If olfaction stimulates affect, then consumers who manifest high levels of affect intensity in response to olfactory stimulations may indeed show stronger levels of craving and desire when faced with an enticing food temptation. Affect intensity measures the strength with which people respond to emotionally charged stimuli (Larsen 1984). One of the temperament dimensions of affect intensity is *sensory arousability*—which identifies individuals who are overly sensitive to sensory stimulation such as olfaction. Moore and Homer (2000) tested this notion and found that high affect intensity consumers expressed a significantly higher level of enjoyment for smelling the aroma of freshly baked bread and the fragrance of perfumes.

(d) Is there a gender difference in consumers’ response to olfactory stimulation? Women manifest more intense levels of emotion than men when exposed to emotionally charged stimuli (Diener et al. 1985). Will women respond differently from men when exposed to certain types of olfactory stimulations?

The results of a preliminary study conducted to respond to the research questions listed above was the focus of discussion at the ROUND TABLE. Essentially, this study found that: