

Event Food as a Tool of Sensory Marketing Communication

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Track Indication

Sponsorship and Events

Abstract

While classical, organically developed event food constitutes an important part of our festive culture, the event food now being devised in research and development departments represents an interesting version of cause-related marketing. Event food not only presents an opportunity to benefit from the image and emotional value of an attractive event, but also new challenges. They include, above all, the choice of product and event and quest for a beneficial product-event affinity, the simultaneous development of the core product and its outward appearance and the product promotion right down to the development of a coherent marketing concept. These tasks and the transformation of the marketing concept into a balanced mix of product design, distribution, communication and pricing, calls not only for classical marketing expertise, but also for recourse to the know-how provided by sensory research, which must then be combined with classical marketing knowledge.

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1. Introduction

Since time immemorial event food has been known and loved – just think of the Thanksgiving Day turkey, the goose on St. Martin's Day, Christmas baking, New Year's pretzels or lamb at Easter. Feast days are something special, as in most cases is the religious occasion or historical origin that gave rise to them, and preparing particular food is a good way of emphasising and underscoring that. So it is hardly surprising that unusual, sometimes exotic ingredients such as cinnamon, cloves and candied orange peel are used. In many cases rituals also play an important part: that of baking and cooking, of offering, making gifts and presenting, or of dining together with the family. Many feast days are no longer conceivable without the appropriate food to accompany them.

That we come to be addressing the subject of event food today is essentially because we live in a world in which the pursuit of special occasions, emotional experiences and sensory highlights has gained in importance. With prosperity, many things have grown more pleasant and interesting, and the demands we make of life have constantly grown. We not only speak of an experiential society, we also experience the tireless endeavours of suppliers, events and other organisations to offer their clients, employees and guests something out of the ordinary (experiential marketing). It is therefore hardly surprising that we see an increasing harking back to the well proven tool of event food, using it as a multi-sensual marketing instrument (c.f. Lindstrom 2005). Illustrations of our understanding of event food in the service of marketing are provided by the company DANONE, which launched the "FruchtZwerge Drink" in France for the 1998 FIFA World Cup, Kraft Foods in Germany with chocolate products for the 2006 World Cup in Germany, Stabinger with a special soccer World Cup cake and Kalfany with a variety of World Cup candies (see *Figs. 1-5* in the Appendix).

2. Players, objectives and target groups

Event food can be put to use by various players. The following groups immediately spring to mind: (1) event organisers wishing to draw attention to their event and possibly seeking to generate event food-related sales; (2) event sponsors wishing to point up their commitment and possibly also want to generate turnover (as official sponsor and supplier for the 1998 soccer World Cup, Danone was able to put the World Cup logo and mascot on its 110 g pack); (3) food and beverages producers looking to exploit the special occasion and perceiving event food not only as a source of revenue, but also as a chance to transfer the event image to their own company and product brands. In this context, they can also hope for cross-selling effects and the generation of tie-in sales. The same principle applies to food retailers and for speciality outlets and stockists of give-aways, promotional merchandise, event articles and the like.

This enumeration already flags possible **application targets**. These range from the sales target and use of event food as a self-liquidator through cross-selling targets, to image objectives or the aim to take advantage of an image transfer and to leverage the brand affectively through the event and create certain beliefs about the brand (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy 2003). We can distinguish between two possibilities of image transfer. One consists of transference of the event image to the event food image, and the other of transference of the event food image to the corporate image or to the image of other parts of the product and/or service programme. As a general rule, events are a suitable way "to showcase brands in a festive, emotionally charged atmosphere" (Gobé 2001, p. 26). At the

same time, the accompanying event food is a good way of discreetly communicating the brand.

The potential target groups with whom event food can be used are also quite varied. The main potential target groups are: (1) prospective **visitors of the event**, whose interest is to be aroused or experience enhanced, or recall supported, (2) other **parties interested in the event**, who can be perceived or won over not as event visitors, but as consumers, but also as market researchers and media users as well as addressees of sponsoring signals, and (3) **people interested in event food**, whose product involvement is considerably more pronounced than their interest in the event as such.

If the functions in question are **in-house corporate events**, such as anniversary celebrations or annual get-togethers of all executives, employees, key accounts and preferred suppliers, the business solicitation objective of event food will presumably make way for the aim of arousing awareness and utilising recall aids.

3. On the choice of products and events

(1) On the choice of product. The requirements to event food will vary depending on the type of product and event. Consideration must be given, for example, to its storability and transportability, to the way it is prepared or presented and to the conditions of consumption, i.e. whether it can be consumed elsewhere, and the consequences of consumption. Soft drinks, confectionery, and dairy products could be chosen not only because they are in line with current consumer trends, but also because they are easy to transport, store well, can be presented well and consumed without “implements”. Depending on the kind of event, certain products can also pick up on contemporary food trends (e.g. healthy eating in the context of sporting events). Another possibility is confectionery with novel flavours and other sensory characteristics (Rowan 1997), such as sweets that start to crackle when sucked, thus raising the attention level. From a semiotic viewpoint, event food is, moreover, a “symbolic system” designed to convey a specific brand message (cf. Campbell 1995), e.g. a health drink that stands for wellbeing and communicates a corresponding brand statement in the event context.

(2) On the choice of event. The choice of the event itself is just as important as the choice of the event food product, which is meant to fit the event. Alternatives include the following:

- already established events such as annual feast days like Christmas and Easter,
- more or less established events such as European or world championships, Olympic Games, festivals and world expos,
- PR events hosted by a company on anniversaries and other occasions, such as sponsored sports events and concerts or seminars for a company’s executives and employees.

(3) On product-event affinity. With regard to the product-related and event-related options, obtaining the right product-event affinity is crucial. In an initial step, establishing which event product might fit which event can be based on plausibility considerations. But in a second step, it is a matter of carrying out specific analyses of the anticipated product-event affinity. For this purpose, representatives of the target groups must be interviewed on the relevant affinities to discover which products would best suit which events from the target group’s point of view. The use of associative methods or allocation methods lends itself to this procedure. The starting point can be a product idea, for which the suitable event is being sought, or a particular event, for which the right event food is to be identified. But the interviewees can also be presented with several event and product alternatives, say in the form

of a matrix on which they have to tick their affinities. Also conceivable would be a correspondence analysis, in which the relationships asked for between the product and event alternatives could be mapped out in a chart (as vectors) and linked in a common sub-space (Greenacre 1993). Products and events are thus depicted in a common space and their respective affinity recognised and interpreted (Scharf and Volkmer 1999).

The relationships (correspondence) between the row points and the column points can thus be revealed and interpreted. The two groups of variables are therefore analysed in such a way that they can simultaneously be depicted as points in a low-dimensional space (Greenacre 1993). *Fig. 6* presents an overview of the event food affinity established in a pilot project.

Insert Fig. 6 about here

The mapping presented in *Fig. 6* is based on a survey of 48 people. The products are represented by circles, the events by a rectangle, and the latter are also printed in italics. The two axes depicted explain 37% and 49% of the total variance. There is a 13% information loss caused by reduction to two dimensions.

4. The use of event food as a marketing mix

Once a promising product and event selection has been made, the specified concept has to be drawn up and realised. As a rule, this will entail a host of challenges, for which some possible solutions will be outlined here. Our comments are based on a company that wishes to use an event food not only as a self-liquidator, but also as a communication measure.

4.1 On product policy

The first question that arises concerns the **core product** and hence the sensory experience – what a confectionery should taste like, how a drink should refresh or a snack satisfy. Obvious as it may seem to create something entirely new, the limits for this are quite narrow. Not only the novelty aspect is essential, but also the suitability for the event – the product that satisfies both requirements stands a particularly good chance of success. An existing, good and suitable product can do the job, especially since a product can by all means be given a new look in terms of outward appearance, product design, branding and product promotion. The relation to the event theme should be established not only through intrinsic but also through extrinsic features. At sporting events, an event drink, besides quenching thirst, could also contain additional functional food features such as – permitted – stimulating or performance-enhancing active ingredients (Hollingsworth 1997). That would be the case with energy drinks.

The **outward appearance of the product** should relate equally to the underlying use and to the event by communicating clearly and unmistakably. This can begin with the name of the product and continue with the shape, colour, embossing, packaging and promotional tags or giveaways. The Danone FruchtZwerge Drink for the 1998 soccer World Cup had a different bottleneck designed to suggest the shape of a football.

As well as adding value, **giveaways** should first and foremost underscore the relationship with the event and also be able to fulfil their communication assignment as recall aids and as word-of-mouth (WOM) inductions. Classical techniques here are toys as tags, pictures to collect, stickers or parts of the packaging as invitations to take part in a prize draw.

Timely and targeted **concept and product tests** are indispensable, as this is the only way of identifying and reducing early on any shortcomings that event food may have in fulfilling all its functions. Another factor to be taken into account is that the outward appearance of the product and the promotion of product features impact through expectations on the way the product is experienced. Development of the core product with the usual blind testing as the first stage and subsequent development of the outward appearance would be a wrong and risky way to proceed. Instead, development and review of the core product, its outward appearance and the product promotion must take place simultaneously (Volkmer 2005). This does not rule out blind testing, design testing and marketing tests, but it does arguably preclude successive partial testing if full tests are not also run.

4.2 On distribution

As with other types of food, the distribution of event food depends not only on the choice of distribution channel, but also on how the product is presented. Particularly important is the timing of the distribution before and during the event and the processing of inquiries in the follow-up to the event. The distribution channels and presentation forms chosen will hinge on the **strategy** – selective or broad distribution – as well as on the **target groups**. Very roughly, target groups can be broken down into four segments:

- event visitors, as people with a particular interest in the event (the “event scene”)
- intensive users of event coverage, as persons likewise interested in the event (e.g. TV audience at event broadcasts)
- people with a special interest in event food whose food involvement is greater than their event involvement (“event food scene”)
- the large majority of people not particularly interested either in the event or event food (“mass”)

As a rule, it will be a matter of reaching event visitors through event catering, kiosks at the event and promotional staff. Intensive event coverage can also be achieved by product placements and brand placements, and not only specially placed advertising. Where reporting takes place in the form of live coverage in cinemas, bars and restaurants or public places, the same applies as for distribution to event visitors. Trendy bars and restaurants and use of the catering and promotional staff there can be particularly important. It may be possible to connect with event food fans through convenience stores such as kiosks and petrol station shops, network marketing (sale to and resale by private individuals), community and fan websites or catering services. To engage the broad masses, the most suitable avenues are classical food and beverage distribution channels like the wholesale and retail trade, notably food retailers and all convenience stores.

The strategy of successive market coverage by initial engagement with event and product fans and subsequent engagement with broad masses will rarely be an option because of the necessary time link between marketing and the event. If at all, it is most likely in cases where it is planned to transform the event food into normal food and use it as a self-liquidator far beyond the date of the event itself.

4.3 On pricing policy

The possibly short lifetime of event food restricts the scope for altering prices over time. On the other hand, the communication objective does make it possible to claim under-absorbed costs as business outlay for tax purposes. One possible pricing approach is to offer giveaways to important target groups with opinion-leader/WOM potential and to opt for the high-

price/premium-price or market skimming pricing strategy for event visitors with low price sensitivity, likewise for the “broad masses” at the beginning of and during an event, and then lower prices towards the end of the event in a bid to cater to declining interest and achieve sales targets through a price-volume or discount strategy. A possible alternative to the latter would be a premium pricing or “harvesting” strategy in the hope that nostalgic buyers will be prepared to pay high prices for love of the product and in awareness of its scarcity.

4.4 On event food communication

Event food is communication, but can be promoted by further communication measures too. The media mix and messages will depend on the target group and communication objective. **Classical media** are suitable for mass communication; **on-site media** are to be recommended at events and at some “trendy venues”, e.g. indoor posters, display material, announcements, personal approaches and handbills. In respect of the **messages**, the tie-in of the product with the event should be given priority. Justification for buying and consuming the product can be dispensed with, unless messages are to be conveyed about the new product core, product availability or price. Event sponsoring can also possibly be conveyed as a good deed. Reference must also be made to the sponsors’ right to use the event logo, e.g. the soccer World Cup 2006 logo on the Kalfany World Cup candies (see *Fig. 5* in the Appendix). Activating WOM advertising by witty messages, for example, is another alternative. Good pictorial images of the event food, the event name, the manufacturer’s logo and the event logo are crucially important, whereas text communication can be restricted to quite brief messages.

Efficiency controls must not only check whether the event food was successfully communicated in terms of its origin and USP; they should also investigate whether the food was purchased and/or consumed, how it was experienced and how everything together – the engagement of all senses – was able to help achieve all the goals set. In particular, the impact of the event on the brand needs to be examined in respect of emotional experiential conditioning and affective loading of the brand (Hehn 2005). This does at least imply a combination of classical instruments of advertising impact research with sensory research tools, taking into account the fact that hedonic judgements are easier to express for the layman than precise verbal descriptions of taste experiences and specific contents of the event food product in question.

5. Summary

While classical, organically developed event food constitutes an important part of our festive culture, the event food now being devised in research and development departments represents an interesting version of cause-related marketing. Event food presents not only an opportunity to benefit from the image and emotional value of an attractive event, but also new challenges. They include, above all, the choice of product and event and quest for a beneficial product-event affinity, the simultaneous development of the core product and its outward appearance, and the product promotion, right down to the development of a coherent marketing concept. This and the transformation of the marketing concept into a balanced mix of product design, distribution, communication and pricing calls not only for classical marketing expertise, but also for recourse to the know-how provided by sensory research, which must then be combined with classical marketing knowledge. It may be presumed that every experience that can be gathered in this process will ultimately be of benefit to all marketing, because it is always a good thing when people with all their senses are placed at the centre of thought and action.

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Appendix

Fig. 1: The „FruchtZwerge-Drink“ (right) on the occasion of the FIFA world cup 1998



Source: Danone GmbH, Haar

Fig. 2: Milka „Fußball-Mix“ on the occasion of the FIFA world cup 2006



Source: Kraft Foods Germany, Bremen

Fig. 3: Milka „Champiolade“ on the occasion of the FIFA world cup 2006



Source: Kraft Foods Germany, Bremen

Fig. 4: Filled world cup cake with mascot and official FIFA logo



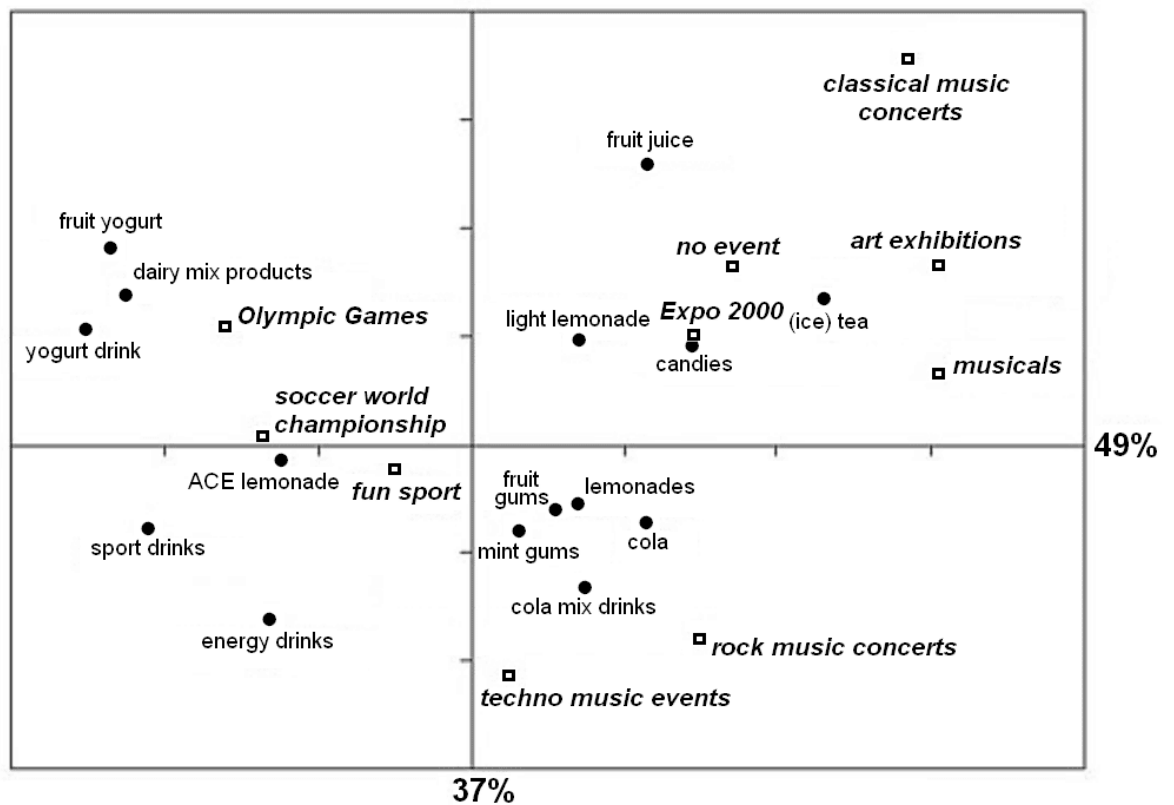
Source: Stabinger Football GmbH/Srl, Sesto

Fig. 5: Sugar free Pulmoll world cup candies



Source: Kalfany Bonbon GmbH & Co. KG, Müllheim

Fig. 6: An example of product-event-affinities – Findings from a correspondence analysis



Source: Scharf and Volkmer (1999)