Tempting the Japanese taste buds

Glenis Ayling
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The four key points for successfully exporting processed foods to Japan are price, flavour, label and the product's image.

That's the message from Toshio Tada, general manager of Trend, a unique shop in Japan that sells only imported processed goods.

Trend in Okayama City, 600 km south-west of Tokyo, sells some 4000 imported processed lines, primarily foodstuffs, but also textiles, souvenirs and some chilled and frozen produce.

The 500 sq m shop has a young male and female staff.

In this article, Toshio Tada discusses what sells well in Trend, in Japan and why, and how Australian exporters can get a bigger share of the market.

He was speaking at a Japanese food market seminar in Perth during International Business Week, 1993.

Japan is one of the largest consumer markets in the world because of its population and therefore big consumer dollar, but it is a highly competitive market in which it is difficult to participate.

Young working females were the biggest buyers in Trend, probably because they had more disposable income than young working males.

As for tastes in food, the Japanese like foods flavoured with salt, soy sauce and monosodium glutamate.

Japanese consumers also preferred products that were attractively packaged — buyers in the western world might describe the packaging as excessive.

"The chocolates taste good, the packaging is colourful, and the image is right," he said.

**Booms or trends**

One unaccountable force in the Japanese food market was booms or trends. A food product would be 'in', and then out of favour just as quickly.

**Tiramisu**

One example was the Italian dessert tiramisu, based on mascarpone cheese. For a while, Italian restaurants in Japan were highly popular and sales of mascarpone cheese were booming. Today, the cheese sold slowly, and Italian restaurants were closing.

**Corona beer**

In another 'boom' example, a highly popular television series featured a much sought-after Japanese actress squeezing fresh lime into an unidentified bottle of beer (the manufacturer was not a program sponsor, so the label was hidden from view). Consumers demanded to know what beer she was drinking, and soon Corona beer, from Mexico, was filling the shelves in Trend. Corona was now the most popular beer amongst Japanese females.

**Ethnic and other foods**

Other boom products included ethnic foods, particularly from south-east Asia. A highly popular product always in short supply was a jellyed coconut, sweet syrup dessert in a jar from the Philippines. Only one factory in the Philippines made the dessert, and it could not increase its capacity. The dessert, which was eaten with canned fruit, sold for A$6.40 a jar, and was most popular amongst females.
Trend stocked about 20 lines of breakfast cereals, but most Japanese bought them as an experiment, as a change from rice for breakfast.

Buyers in Trend were also experimenting with cheeses; Mr Tada stocks 50 varieties. Sales of cheddar cheese were small, but young Japanese were trying the soft, European-style cheeses.

Wine
The wine market, for example, was not that big in Japan because not a lot of Japanese were used to drinking wine. Most Japanese shoppers in Trend bought a bottle of wine on the label. The Californian Wine Association, for example, had a strong advertising campaign in Japan; Californian wines were well known and they were the third most popular wines amongst Japanese females shopping in Trend.

White wine, sweeter rather than dry, was the most popular wine in Japan. The Japanese preferred a sweeter wine because sake was becoming drier.

The average Japanese consumer did not necessarily associate wine with Australia. Mr Tada said that labels identifying the wine as Australian, rather than State or regional labels, should be promoted to gain a bigger share of the Japanese market. — Glenis Ayling.

For details about exporting to Japan, contact AUSTRADE (Australian Trade Commission) on (09) 261 7911