

Comment: Managing the risks of reformulation

By: [Petah Marian](#) | 27 August 2010

Reformulating products, particularly well loved ones, poses a great risk to manufacturers, so when Mars Inc announced it has reformulated its chocolate bar ranges, it wasn't surprising to hear that it has required some five years of research and development.

Mars announced earlier this week that following 40,000 research and development hours, five years and a EUR10m (US\$12.7m) investment, it would be reducing the amount of saturated fat in its Mars, Snickers, Milky Way and Topic Bars by 15%.



Mars announced this week that it has reformulated its chocolate bars

Brand reformulation is a dangerous game, just look at the backlash Coke faced when it launched 'New Coke' back in 1985. Within three months of the replacement product's launch, the company faced such a strong reaction from consumers it was forced to backtrack and bring back the old product, which was renamed Coca-Cola Classic.

While that product reformulation was more to do with what the company saw as evolving consumer tastes, many recent reformulations, such as in the case of Mars, have more to do with an increased focus on health and wellness.

Industry analyst James Amoroso said there are two ways for manufacturers to approach the health, wellness and nutrition trend, one is to put more good stuff in and the other is to take bad stuff out.

However, he highlighted the risk manufacturers face when they do this: "If you change your formulation, then potentially you've got a different product, so with any reformulation you do, you have to do it in such a way that consumers are not going to be disappointed with the taste."

Reformulations are likely to become increasingly common in the medium term, with the Food Standards Agency (FSA) in the UK putting increased pressure on manufacturers to reduce the amount of saturated fat in food such as biscuits, cakes, buns, chocolate and added sugar in soft drinks.

In March this year, the FSA recommended that manufacturers reduce the saturated fat levels in some chocolate confectionery by at least 10%, as well as offer smaller soft drinks bottles and reduce the saturated fat content in plain, sweet and savoury biscuits and plain cakes by 10% and 5% in non-plain biscuits and cakes.

Manufacturers face a difficult task in achieving these recommended reductions. Amoroso said: "It is really difficult to make a salad dressing that is low in fat that tastes anywhere near as good as the full fat version. It is really difficult and there are different parts of the tongue that are impacted. There's a whole different mouth feel."

When making changes, manufacturers are understandably hesitant to tinker with a successful formula. When considering changes, Nestle has a system which it calls "60/40+" where in tests, 60% of consumers prefer the new product to an old one and a competitor and there is an additional nutritional "plus".

Describing Mars' reformulated range, Amoroso said Mars would be changing the fat it uses. "They're going to have to use a different kind of fat, and you know yourself that butter tastes completely different to vegetable oil," he said. The reason the manufacturer has only reduced it by 15%, he added, was because "their science doesn't allow them to go further without jeopardising the taste of the product".

Still, Amoroso has high expectations for Mars' new reformulated range. "I know Mars pretty well, and I know they are not going to reformulate the products so they taste different. They'll end up tasting pretty much the same as they did."

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