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Seafish Research and Information

The **Seafish Challenge** Reviewed

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BACKGROUND

In 1998 Seafish ran a nationwide competition, The Seafish Challenge, the aim of which was to encourage fish processing companies to develop successful new fish products for restaurants in the mid-price / mid-market sector.

All in all, 70 fish and/or seafood products were entered by 25 processors, competing in any of five award categories identified by research undertaken prior to the competition by an independent research agency Reflexions Communication Research. A series of judging stages eventually produced five winners and five runners-up. The overall aim of the current research exercise, again conducted by Reflexions Communication Research, was to evaluate this initiative by collecting the views of:

- the processors who participated in the competition, and
- the suppliers and caterers who encountered the products promoted as a result of the competition.

METHODOLOGY & SAMPLE

A qualitative approach was adopted, involving conversational in-depth telephone interviews which took place during October and November 1999.

The sample was divided into two sets:

■ 10 processors, of whom:

- 7 were those whose products had either won or come runner-up in one or more of the award categories, and
- 3 were those whose products had reached the second stage of the competition, but had neither won nor come runner-up.

■ 10 suppliers / caterers:

- 2 suppliers
- 8 caterers

all of whom had been contacted regarding at least one product that had won or come runner-up.



Overall the Seafish Challenge proved very popular with those companies who participated. Most, if not all, would like to see it repeated - albeit with some changes to the overall format - and perhaps on a two yearly basis.

Although at the time of writing this report, no product from the Challenge has been launched with a major caterer, some of the products have been successfully placed, either with minor caterers or indeed retailers.

Other positive spin-offs have been moves towards increased processing / production capability and for at least one company, an enhanced profile in the eyes of caterers.

The main reason behind the current lack of success with major caterers, would appear to lie with the fact that the format of the competition runs counter to the existing processes of product development and uptake in this sector. That is, typically when a product is successfully brought into the market, it tends to happen as the result of an established relationship between processor and caterer, where both have some input on the product before it is completed.

In consequence, another associated drawback was the lack of involvement of caterers / suppliers during the various stages of the competition.

Thus, any similar initiative to be held in the future should seek to do several things:

- i) feed more closely into existing procedures for bringing new products to the market;
- ii) work more closely, throughout the competition stages, with potential purchasers ie. suppliers / caterers, of the new products;
- iii) widen the remit to include retail as well as foodservice products.

The following sections of this report go on to outline in greater detail the views of a) the processors; b) the suppliers / caterers, and where appropriate any overlap in views is made clear. The final section describes the shared views of both sets of respondents on the format of any future initiative in this area.

It should perhaps be borne in mind that the competition's divergence from the procedures usually adopted in the process of new product development is a recurrent theme, and much of the following feedback can be understood within this context.

THE VIEWS OF THE PROCESSORS

What were processors' attitudes to the overall idea of the competition and what led them to participate in this particular competition?

All respondents were agreed that the main strength of the competition format is that it is an exciting concept that encourages innovation. Other advantages cited included:

- *a testing ground for ideas;*
- *an opportunity to enhance company profiles.*

The processors in particular, were encouraged to participate in the Seafish Challenge by:

- *the prize money (not just a cash prize, but geared usefully towards promotion);*
- *the efficiency of the organisation prior to and during the event.*

What, if anything, might have deterred processors from participating?

Processors might have been deterred in two ways:

- *restrictions on entry criteria;*
 - *the products entered could not previously have been available to the catering market.*
- *the fact that the competition was aimed exclusively at the catering trade rather than also at the retail sector;*
 - *this was a particularly pertinent issue for those processors whose chief market is the retail sector.*
- *an insufficient level of involvement from the caterer / supplier side.*

Why did processors enter products in the categories that they did?

Quite simply, processors tended to enter products into the category(ies) that best fitted a pre-existing idea of their own, rather than to develop products for the Challenge itself.

What specific features of the competition were regarded positively, which were not, and how could the latter be improved?

On the whole processors were positive about the event and tended to find that:

- *the event itself was enjoyable;*
- *what contact they had with suppliers / caterers was useful.*

However, processors could feel that:

- *the criteria for the competition (specifying that the products could not currently be available) meant that they had not been able to generate caterers' interest in their products prior to winning;*
- *the same entry criteria also meant that they could not launch their product soon enough after the competition;*
- *as a result, the advertising organised by Seafish appeared too early for the processors to take advantage of the momentum generated by it;*
- *there was insufficient involvement from caterers in the competition;*
- *there was insufficient feedback about products from the catering judges.*

To improve these areas of the competition, processors made various suggestions:

- *the criteria for entry could be loosened to allow products which had recently been launched still to go forward into the competition;*
- *the advertising could be delayed until the processors felt ready to take advantage of it;*
- *a supplier / caterer could become a sponsor of the competition and thus a listing and/or a trial could be guaranteed;*
- *feedback about products could automatically be given to participants.*

Finally, processors also gave reasons that were not directly related to the competition:

- *some admitted simply being less knowledgeable about marketing techniques;*
- *others mentioned factors outside the sphere of the Challenge which hindered their progress.*

What contact was made with suppliers and caterers, regarding the competition products?

The processors tended to have contacted suppliers and/or caterers:

- *this initial contact tended to be by telephone or direct mail;*
- *this might then be followed up with the sending of samples or face-to-face presentations.*
- *however, processors could feel that the views of the suppliers / caterers were not swayed by the fact that their product had either won or come runner-up in the Seafish Challenge.*

What deterred this group from giving a listing or trial to products entered into the Challenge?

Though this group were generally able to recall that they had seen one or more of the products, they were less frequently able to recall a specific association with the Seafish Challenge.

Caterers could be deterred from giving a trial to a product because:

- *they had no pre-existing relationship with the processor putting forward the product*
- *they had no input on the product before it was completed;*
- *it was unclear that they would have exclusivity for any product they might wish to take up - a fear that was confirmed for some by the subsequent Seafish advertising;*
- *they did not find the particular product itself attractive or appropriate to them or their customers (eg. too innovative, too little plate coverage).*

Some of the same factors also deterred suppliers:

- *they were not a regular user of the processor putting forward the product;*
- *they did not find the product itself attractive (eg. too upmarket, not enough sophistication).*

However one further deterrent given by suppliers but not caterers was:

- *a product name that did not describe the product in a way that was both clear and readily understandable, nor was easy to pronounce.*

What **could** appeal to caterers - whether or not they eventually took up the products - was:

- *the taste;*
- *the ease of preparation and portioning;*
- *the right degree of innovation;*
- *promotional monies from Seafish.*

What would encourage greater uptake or trialling of products that may be successful in any future Challenge?

■ **Caterers could be given an opportunity to have some input prior to any competition, in terms of products to be developed*;**

■ **Caterers / suppliers could be given greater encouragement to become involved in the event:**

- *by having the opportunity to see and taste products before results are announced,*
- *in some cases, by being on the judging panel;*

■ **Contact at the competition event between processors and suppliers / caterers could be given greater encouragement:**

- *processors could be given more feedback about their products,*
- *processors could be given a greater chance to develop relationships with suppliers / caterers;*

■ **Advertising after the event could be co-ordinated with processors, in order that:**

- *processors can contact managers of major brands individually before the product is publicly advertised,*
- *processors can then use the momentum of the advertising to contact suppliers / caterers for whom exclusivity is not an issue.*

* Caterers had in fact been approached to take part in the research prior to the competition, and their views on new product development had been ascertained. However the findings reported here suggest that any future competition would benefit from closer, more involved liaison with caterers.



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