

MARKETING SPECIALTY JAMS AND JELLIES TO GOURMET CONSUMERS

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Increased global supply has intensified competition in all agricultural and food commodities. Nevertheless, the Northeast offers premier marketing opportunities for high quality, specialty food products all along the Washington to Boston corridor, especially those perceived as having gourmet appeal or health benefits. In a recent marketing project, we interviewed gourmet consumers in the NYC metropolitan area to better understand their preferences when purchasing “specialty jams and jellies” and to explore marketing strategies to capture this high-end market effectively. This article describes some of those findings.

Gourmet Jams and Jellies are a Treat

Gourmet jams and jellies are perceived and used as self-indulgent luxuries by many of the consumers interviewed and, therefore, are eminently giftable. In fact, many consumers were introduced to their favorite gourmet jams and jellies as business gifts, host gifts, and personal gifts from friends and relatives. Some also gave them as gifts themselves. They ate these jams and jellies with their friends at special occasions, or when they wanted to reward themselves with a treat.

Gourmet consumers were generally very excited about trying new products, as new products evoke their curiosity. They are willing to pay a higher price (upwards of \$10.00 per jar) for it if they perceive the product to possess the exceptional characteristics that appeal to them. Packaging combined with price is the primary tool that consumers used to judge these products were gourmet, giftable and otherwise special. These consumers also indicated that the higher the price, the more quality they expected when they tried the products. Therefore, a successful packaging and pricing strategy can induce consumers to try the product for the first time, but only good quality will get them to purchase the product again.

What Packaging Says “Gourmet”, and Where Do They Buy It?

Among the consumers interviewed, brand plays virtually no role in gourmet jam and jelly purchase decisions. Thus, without a brand image and often with no experience, these users are essentially reminded or prompted to buy by the packaging. Packaging, if appealing, is extremely important in terms of portraying the gourmet image and inviting sampling. Comments from consumers about gourmet packaging included – it should be “authentic,” “homey,” “... have a country look,” “... look homemade,” “pretty,” “exotic,” “very clean, like glass,” “smaller,” “wide-mouth jar (to fit spoon)”. However, caution should be exercised in fashioning “homemade” packaging to a point where the look might not justify premium pricing, a core value to the appeal of the gourmet jam and jelly market.

Consumers interviewed in this study indicated that they purchase gourmet jams and jellies from various independent stores or farm markets and not from supermarkets. Many of these stores are small; thus, they do not have burdensome slotting allowances for processors to sell to, but the number and geographical spread and diversity of these stores may make them difficult to service. Focusing on stores and markets with gourmet reputations in a target market area would be more effective for specialty jam and jelly marketers.

What Should Gourmet Jams and Jellies Taste Like?

In jams, the quality of a gourmet jam is measured by the pieces or “chunks” of fruit in it. Some consumers described it as, “...feel that you have to chew”. And in jellies, the gourmet quality is measured by a pasty, non-runny consistency, and the color of the jelly, which should look like the fruit in it. This study showed that some consumers have a strong preference toward jam or jelly, and more gourmet food consumers preferred jam than jelly.

The gourmet jam and jelly consumers claimed that they could definitely tell the difference in the quality of gourmet items versus mass-produced products, and Smucker’s was 3 used as an example of the mass-produced products.

They indicated that the taste of gourmet jams and jellies should not be too sweet, no added sugar when possible, and natural – no preservatives, additives, or aftertaste.

The most mentioned positive comments for their favorite jam or jelly products, include:

- “Made of interesting or exotic fruits”
- “Fruity, not much sweetness”
- “It was not too sweet or too tart”
- “I liked the consistency, thick and chewy”; “Rich and pasty”
- “Texture is extremely smooth”
- “Flavor was more full and more interesting”.

When asked why they did not like a jam or jelly product, the most mentioned comment was “too sweet”. It was associated with too much sugar, chemicals and preservatives, low quality, and cheap. Other negative comments include:

- “It tastes like regular jelly”; “Ordinary tasting”; “Very supermarket tasting”
- “I don’t like the consistency; too much like Welch’s or other supermarket brand”
- “Texture is runny
- “Way too sweet and too fake”
- “Too tart”
- “Color was off, not like the fruit”.

Marketing Opportunities

This study showed that urban gourmet consumers are very interested in trying new specialty jam and jelly products. A distribution opportunity could exist through gourmet food stores, farmers’ markets, and bed & breakfasts in key Northeastern markets, as well as national gourmet food catalogs. The products could be sold individually or packaged as gift items with other gourmet products. That also presents additional new product opportunities for tie-in products. When marketing specialty jams and jellies to the premium food market, special attention should be paid to packaging that conveys a gourmet image and portrays other intangible image characteristics of the product, including history, any exotic nature and health benefits, or geographical tie-in of the fruit, the farm and the region. When selling to gourmet consumers, excitement counts. However, product quality and consistency is still the key for long-term profitability.

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** For more information on the Beach Plum Project, see <http://www.beachplum.cornell.edu/>.