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Top of Mind: The 'Performance/ Sensory' Spectrum

By Carol Davies and Laurence Knight
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THE NEW products game has become a numbers game, and that makes it a hard one to win. In 2003 there were 33,678 new consumer goods products launched, according to Productscan Online, a database from Marketing Intelligence Service.

That's double the number of launches tracked 10 years earlier. New products are meant to refresh brands and make them stand out from their rivals. With so much refreshing going on by so many companies, how can a brand possibly break through?

Having developed new products in dozens of categories, from bleach to fine fragrance, we've learned that one of the most powerful ways to infuse a brand with fresh, revolutionary thinking is to do what brands like Target, Apple and Subway have done—that is, to innovate by creatively placing a brand along the "performance/ sensory" benefit spectrum.

While brands typically deliver both "performance" and "sensory" benefits, most brands lean decidedly in one direction or the other. "Performance" brands thrive on technology and science. Breakthrough functional benefits are essential to their existence. Brands like Swiffer, Intel and Volvo live at this end of the spectrum. The mantra of "performance" brands is to satisfy the consumer with high-impact, blockbuster products, rolled out like an endless red carpet of "new and improved" inventions.

With "sensory" brands aesthetics and style, not technology, are core to the equity. While functionality is important to these brands, fashion is even more important. Shape, color, texture, fragrance and taste are the elements that make such brands unique and boldly new. Think VW Beetle, SoBe beverages and BeneFit cosmetics. These brands strive to indulge, entertain and define the consumer with an ever-changing roster of flavors, styles and expressive attitudes.

Brands within a category tend to cluster at one end of the spectrum or the other, leaving a lot of open territory in between. Brands that are willing and able can stake out this unclaimed space, creating opportunity for themselves and headaches for competitors that stay put.

Target, for example, spurned the plain-Jane imagery of discount retailing, revamping its brand with sassy attitude and trendy, personality-rich designers.

On a smaller scale, Caldrea has brought style to the cleaning aisle with a veritable bouquet of indulgent fragrance choices and simple, sophisticated packaging that

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makes any mud room look great.

Opportunities await for brands bold enough to make similar shifts in categories like drug retailing, nutritional supplements and shoes.

In the ultimate category-disrupting move, brands seamlessly fuse "performance" and "sensory" characteristics, merging the best of both in one brand.

Apple has repeatedly dazzled consumers with products like the Macintosh, iMac and iPod, as cool for their leading-edge technology as they are for their trendsetting design and color. Whole Foods turns natural and organic foods into a delicious, mouthwatering cornucopia of savory sights and smells. When flying on JetBlue, consumers enjoy the "sensory" benefits of blue potato chips and contemporary decor from the "performance" perch of a low-priced seat.

Most companies excel in marketing either "performance" brands or "sensory" brands, but not both. This specialization can be a decided strategic strength. It can also be a vexing hurdle to sliding along the spectrum. Even accomplished companies can encounter a capability gap that grows bigger and bigger the further they move away from their traditional area of strength.

Olay, for example, has been hugely successful and once again has a hit with its "performance"-based launch of Regenerist—a higher-priced line of facial care products that targets consumers who might otherwise opt for cosmetic surgery. The brand has been less sure of itself, however, with its "sensory" based Ohm, an attempt to grab the yoga craze by the tail and be on trend. And who can forget how Quaker took Snapple, a quirky up-and-comer brand "made from the best stuff on earth," and nearly snuffed the stuff out?

Successfully shifting a brand is about more than just applying the company's "proven" innovation techniques to new objectives. As a brand flexes along the "performance/ sensory" spectrum, its whole outlook on innovation must flex too, from how ideas are seeded to the innovation talent pool to the metrics for judging whether or not an idea is good. The consumer-led methodologies that create inspired "performance" brands produce dulled down, sinfully safe "sensory" brands. The creative-led processes that create boffo "sensory" brands deliver wimpy, so-what "performance" options. The key to shaking up a category and a brand is to "think different," as Apple once said.

Brands which can master the performance/sensory benefit spectrum—brands like Nike, Maybelline and Mountain Dew—may be few and far between, but they have a decided advantage. Today, when cell phones make color statements and fragrances deliver therapy, consumers expect more from their brands. Those brands that can give them more along the performance/sensory spectrum will certainly get more back.

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