CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES

ARE THERE **REAL** DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BRANDS?

Contract Testing Inc.

INTRODUCTION

Whether chewy, crunchy, extra-chocolaty, or simply decadent - chocolate chip cookies continue to be king of the cookie aisle. But with so many interpretations of our classic favorite on the shelf, we wondered, are they all equally good and what aspects of the chocolate chip cookie stand out as the most important?

The following research aims to explore whether there are perceivable differences between packaged on-the-shelf chocolate chip cookies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research sampled 75 females in the Greater Toronto Area - all mothers with kids at home, who are principal grocery shoppers and purchase and consume chocolate chip cookies on a regular basis.

We tested 12 samples of packaged chocolate chip cookies sourced from various local grocery stores and narrowed the field to include only chocolate chip varieties (i.e., no Chunks, Rainbow, etc.). Our samples ranged from $.97 to $4.49 per package and included both national brands and private label.

The samples were first evaluated blind with a fully rotated trial order, utilizing a combination of 9-point hedonic scales and 9-point intensity scales. This was followed by an evaluation of the packaging, a re-tasting of the products with full brand awareness, and some additional questions on pricing and factors impacting their purchase decision.

RESULTS

In blind tasting, there was significant variation in the appeal and sensory profiles of the 12 samples – revealing that all chocolate chip cookies are NOT the same. Overall Liking ratings ranged from a whopping high of 7.83 to a dismal low of 4.55. Similarly, top two-box purchase intent ranged from an 82% high to a 14% low.

One product stood apart with the highest ratings on all key measures – thus receiving recognition as the 'Gold Standard' within the category. And despite the fact that this category is one of indulgence, there is in fact such a thing as an unappealing chocolate chip cookie…in fact there are at least three which sat at the very bottom of the performance ranking and from a sensory perspective, fall well below the standards for an on-market product.

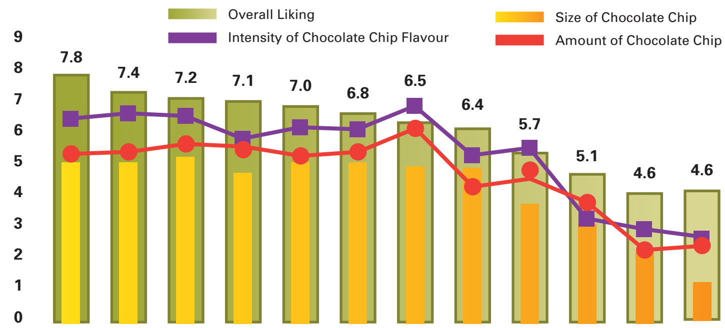
What makes a Great Chocolate Chip Cookie?

Results suggest that it's mainly about the flavour, and in particular the chocolate flavour. Cookies with the highest overall appeal also tended to have a stronger chocolate flavour, and more visible chocolate chips (see Gr. 1). Other key positive drivers of liking included overall flavour, richness of flavour, size of the chocolate chips, as well as the pleasantness of the aftertaste. The higher a cookie scored on these attributes, the greater likelihood that it was well-liked overall.

And by the same token, negative drivers of liking include the ratio of chocolate chips to cookie, and sweetness – meaning the cookies with the lowest ratios of chocolate chips to cookie and lowest intensity of sweetness, tended to have the poorest results.

Interestingly, overall texture was not a key driver of overall liking, which tells us that either the soft and chewy or the crunchy varieties have potential for high consumer acceptance. Within our sample set, the cookie

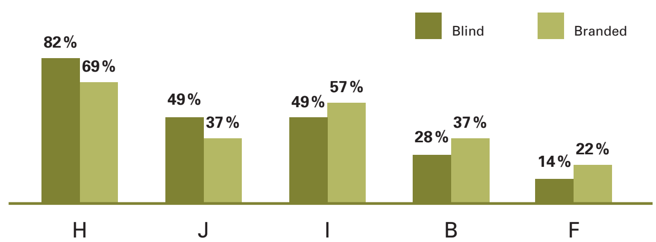
Graph 1 Positive Drivers of Overall Liking: Intensity of Flavour, Size, and Amount of Chocolate Chips



which had the worst overall texture score was also the crunchiest, least chewy, driest, and hardest – while the cookie with the most appealing texture was the softest, chewiest, and moistest. However, there were many top performing crunchy cookies, and not all soft cookies were tops in appeal. Texture is a contributing factor but it does not act alone.

Brand Impact

Graph 2 – Top 2 Box Purchase Intent – Blind vs. Branded



Following the blind evaluation, respondents were shown the cookie packages and asked to re-taste and evaluate each cookie. Generally, awareness of the brand did not have a meaningful impact on overall liking scores. That is, for most samples overall liking scores remained similar whether evaluated blind or with branding. However, for some products there was a moderate shift in purchase intent. For example, branding had a negative impact on products H and J, and a positive impact on products I, B, and F (see Gr. 2).

And there was another indication that branding does have an impact on purchase decisions in this category. When asked about their typical purchase behaviour when it comes to chocolate chip cookies, most respondents claimed that they are loyal to a repertoire of two to three brands (see Gr. 3). Interestingly, no one claimed that they exclusively purchase brands of cookies that are on sale.

Graph 3 - Chocolate Chip Cookie Purchase Behaviour

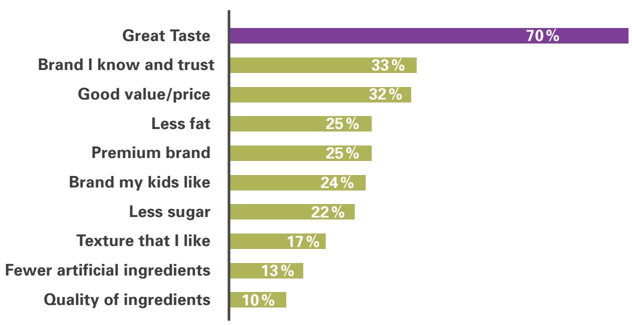
Price and Quality

Samples for this test were purchased off the shelf of various local grocery stores and ranged from a bargain price of .99 cents per package to a more premium $4.49. In order to explore the relationship between price and performance, the retail package price was converted to a price per cookie. While the cheapest cookie was also the lowest perceived quality, some of the highest quality cookies were not the most premium priced. In fact, there wasn't much of a relationship at all between price and performance (see Gr. 4).

Graph 4 - Price vs. Quality

And while some claimed that good value/price was an important factor in their purchase decision, overwhelmingly 70% base their decision primarily on impressions that the product will taste great (see Gr. 5). Sitting at the bottom of this priority list, were aspects related to the quality and naturalness of ingredients – suggesting perhaps that this category of indulgence may earn a 'pass' on some of the health and wellness attributes that are motivating factors in other categories. Consistent with the product evaluations, 'Texture that I like' is also a weak factor in purchase decisions.

Graph 5 – Most Important Factors Driving Purchase Decision (Claimed)



CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The objective of this research was to investigate the sensory performance of packaged on-shelf chocolate chip cookies. We included both national brands and private label brands, and recruited female consumers residing in one geographical area – Greater Toronto. Further research might also explore whether similar differences and preferences are revealed in other geographic markets, or among children who after all are the chief experts in the category.

Within this framework, it was revealed that there are differences in the sensory profiles and likeability of brands within the category and that key flavour attributes, particularly those related to the chocolate, are the main sensory drivers of liking and differentiators among the brands. Great taste is also the top stated factor influencing purchase decisions.

Chocolate chip cookies may be an indulgent treat for many – but they are a staple purchase for many mothers, and continue to be one of the most kid-endorsed comfort foods on the grocery shelves. A tasty category like cookies provides no exception to the lessons we've learned through decades of sensory testing: consumers' taste buds can be an effective input into your business decisions…and make 'smart cookies' out of all of us.

For questions about this research, or how you can leverage consumer taste buds in your business, contact Andrew Scholes at andrew.scholes@contracttesting.com.

Contract Testing Inc.

CONTACT:

119 West Drive
Brampton, ON L6T 2J6

6760 Jimmy Carter Blvd. Suite 110
Atlanta, GA 30071

Phone: 905 456 0783
Fax: 905 456 1172
Email: info@contracttesting.com
www.contracttesting.com

TEST SITE LOCATIONS:

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