

Lost in murky waters

Seafood marketers are struggling to achieve a clarity of consumer message, writes *Alex Brownsell*

Foreign visitors to Britain must be shocked to find how uninterested the population of this island nation remains in the contents of the waters surrounding it. Fish and chips may still be synonymous with British cuisine, but consumers are still not being hooked by wider messages promoting the variety and flexibility that seafood offers.

In response, the seafood industry body Seafish has announced a 12-month promotional drive to boost fish consumption. The PR and press activity will attempt to educate consumers on several issues, such as how to include fish when feeding a family on a budget and how to interest children in eating seafood. Meanwhile, frozen-food brands Birds Eye and Young's are to widen their natural fish ranges with unbreaded and unbattered products, tapping into the message that fish is healthy.

Unclear communication

One of the problems of marketing fish in the past, according to Seafish market planning and strategy manager Karen Galloway, was that many consumers simply did not understand what was on offer.

'Poultry is poultry, whereas in seafood you've got white fish, oily fish and shellfish,' she says. 'We're in a lucky position that we can offer so many messages, but marketing does need to become clearer and more consistent.'

Seafood marketers have certainly had trouble finding consistency, as the inclusion of a range of value, convenience, health and taste messages has served to create very muddled marketing. Fish is naturally rich in protein, omega 3 and vitamin D, and its benefits are undeniable. The question is, though, do consumers really have the time or inclination to worry about fatty acids or specific vitamins?

Yvonne Adam, marketing director at Young's Seafood, believes they do. 'Fish has many health benefits. The only potential downside is that people don't fully understand all of them,' she says. 'Consumers have no problem accepting that fish can be good for you in a number of different ways. It's just a matter of highlighting the most



Seafood wide range of products means that many consumers are confused about its health benefits and issues of sustainability

52%
of consumers are aware they should be eating seafood twice a week

29%
of consumers eat seafood twice a week

9%
of consumers do not eat any seafood

60%
of seafood consumers eat cod

Source: Seafish



Young's plans to add natural products

important attributes, such as omega 3, in a clear way.'

The health angle has been exploited by the Food Standards Agency (FSA), which has advised consumers to eat fish twice a week. However, under pressure from environmental groups concerned about dwindling fish stocks, the agency has called a review of this guidance.

Nonetheless, a spokeswoman for the FSA says the nutritional advice is unlikely to be retracted, and that the primary debate is whether that advice should be supplemented with sustainability information. Galloway says that Seafish is opposed to such a move, as it believes consumers are not ready

for a 'complex' issue such as the sustainability of fish stocks.

Rory Teeling, planning director at Doner Cardwell Hawkins, Young's ad agency, argues that seafood marketing should respond to economic conditions and focus on convenience.

'It is quite difficult to earmark a generic fish as good value. Consumers are concerned about things like the smell of fresh fish, and the possibility that they will poison themselves. The marketing should emphasise that this has been addressed,' he says.

Adam is convinced that seafood brands are successfully tempting consumers away from meat. 'Marketing obviously has a key role to play in expanding awareness of which products are available, as well as demystifying fish preparation,' she says.

If brands really can break down the enigmas of the sector and give consumers a clearer idea of the main products on offer, people might be able to view fish as more than just the newspaper-wrapped, vinegar-soaked conclusion to a Friday night. ■

