The Newest Pandora’s Box, the “Artificial Exit,” as Inspiration for Product Development and Innovation

Birth of a Trend
To be born, a trend needs two things. It must have a champion—someone or something that pushes it forward. The part of the champion can be played by a corporation, government, individual, or another trend. A champion is more a force than an entity. The second critical element is that a new trend must link to other existing trends already at play. If a new trend doesn’t link to existing trends, it will be a short-lived fad. A trend that relies on villainizing a food or food group to gain ground also is destined to be short-lived. Successful, long-lived trends rise on their own merits.

The Newest Pandora’s Box—The “Artificial Exit”
When a trend is born that is all encompassing, ties in with many other trends, and has less chance of diminishing and has attributes that make it virtually unstoppable, we call it a “Pandora’s box.” Once opened, a Pandora’s box is extremely unlikely to close again. It behaves like a virus, spreading into and influencing other trends, replicating its influence and increasing its alliances. Pandora’s boxes also enjoy the rare attribute of having few or no adversaries. There are no adversarial sides—everyone is on board and moving it forward, on one tract or another, with the common purpose to keep it alive and growing.

The “artificial exit” is one of the newest Pandora’s boxes in the food industry, joining the ranks of sustainability and “adultized” kids meals as an unstoppable trend. Its birth is a morph—a cousin to a current trend that steals the spotlight. The trend began with “natural,” moved to “free from,” moved on briefly to “pure,” and finally arrived at “artificial exit.”

What sets the artificial exit trend apart from its cousins is that it is better defined and directional. It allows a company to strategically enter the trend by clearly demonstrating its entrance strategy to both consumers and industry clients. It isn’t a surprise that this more concise cousin has been born, since consumer research began with “natural,” moved to “free from,” moved on briefly to “artificial exit,“ and finally arrived at “artificial exit.”

Although the artificial exit trend itself has no adversaries, there are some who question the corporate motivation behind the trend. For example, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) has commented that, “Just because something is hard to pronounce, doesn’t mean it’s unsafe.” Some of the additives companies are removing are harmless, such as calcium propionate and sodium lactate. These moves are viewed by CSPI as more about public relations than public health. Food companies can make the mistake of blindly following a trend, good or bad, instead of educating the public on the reasons why following a trend may not be the right move for the company or consumer. Trends are rarely an all-or-nothing proposition, so strategizing based on the intersection of company and public needs is usually the wisest course.

Layering Trends
Layering trends within one product concept (e.g., a consumer trend with a flavor trend) can strengthen a trend and lengthen its life cycle, as long as the layering effect makes sense and the layers themselves are complementary. The great thing about layering a consumer trend with a flavor trend is the only way to fail is by not entering the trend.

Below are a few of the flavor trends with staying power that could layer nicely with the artificial exit Pandora’s box in 2015–2016:

1) Beverages: Drinkable grains have moved laterally, with oats, quinoa, teff, and their cousins moving out of cereal boxes and side dishes and into beverages.

2) Grains: Freekeh, grits, farro, oh my! These all have ties to the experimental mood and regional and global cuisine interests of consumers. Freekeh is arriving through Middle Eastern and North African influences, grits from the American Deep South, and farro from Italy.

3) Pies and Pastries: Regional pies and Scandinavian pastries are outshining cupcakes as consumers continue to seek out regional and historical ties to the foods they eat. Look for pastries such as kringles from Scandinavia and shoofly, Shaker lemon, key lime, and chess pies from America.

• Packaged Facts—66% of consumers prefer food items with fewer and simpler ingredients and take nutritional content, “ingredient-free,” and health benefit statements into consideration when buying food and beverage items.

• CivicScience—Americans believe “preservatives/chemicals” are more harmful than added sugar, saturated fat, and sodium.

• Technomic, Inc.—43% of consumers purchase products free from additives because of perceived health benefits; 78% of consumers see “no artificial sweeteners” as healthier; 73% of consumers say that antibiotic-free foods or beverages are healthier; 21% of consumers think that additive-free means better taste.

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4) **Chip Nouveau**: New chips from well beyond the usual potato and corn varieties (nothing against potatoes and corn—love you!) are streaming into the marketplace. The next generation of chips involves expanding the boundaries into beans, hummus, sweet potato, quinoa, kale, carrot, black sesame, and on and on!

5) **Alcoholic Beverages**: Spirits have moved out of the bar and into the kitchen. Rum has long been incorporated in cakes and brandy in chocolate sauce, but now they are being joined by whiskey in flourless chocolate cake, beer peanut brittle, maple syrup made in bourbon barrels, and tequila ginger pancakes.

6) **Cuban and Floribbean Foods**: Cuban and Floribbean foods are arriving in the wake of the relaxation of travel restrictions between the United States and Cuba. The race to discover Cuba’s food secrets is on. Floribbean food is closely tied to Cuban food and is influenced by visitors and immigrants from Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, and other Caribbean locales. Florida is the gateway for all of these cuisines.

Don’t be afraid to explore the expanding frontier of foods, flavors, and ingredients—you’re sure to discover new product opportunities and inspirations.