

Soup-To-Nuts Podcast: Unilever is doubling-down on purpose driven brands to fuel innovation

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With newcomers launching practically every day in the food and beverage industry, the pressure is on for legacy brands to up their innovation game – and according to industry giant Unilever the best way to do this is to start with modern consumers’ core values and address their top concerns.

According to Leslie Miller, who is Unilever’s marketing director of ice cream North America, this means developing solutions for consumers’ growing fears about the environment, their personal health and the well-being of the larger community.

She explains in this week’s episode of [FoodNavigator-USA’s Soup-To-Nuts Podcast](#) that Unilever shares these fundamental concerns and is on a mission to make a true impact on people, communities and the planet. To do this, she says, Unilever is doubling-down on innovating purpose-driven brands and products that taste good, feel good and are a force for good.

Start with purpose

When it comes to innovation, whether it is a new product or brand, Unilever always starts with purpose, which is increasingly influencing consumers’ purchasing decisions, Miller said.

She explained that Unilever’s foods and refreshments team *“is a really cool collective group of people who are trying really to offer products that taste good, feel good and really are a force for good, and it really reflects the importance of the things in the world today, like purpose and sustainability and nutrition. So that is really where we start all of our conversations on all our brands.”*

She added that consumer desire to support brands with a purpose is no longer a concern among a fringe group of shoppers or early adopters, but it really has reached the masses – making it a value that innovators cannot ignore.

To ensure that Unilever’s and consumers’ definition of purpose align, Miller says the company is constantly talking with shoppers – a strategy that has helped it keep pace with evolving expectations and the competition.

“We are listening to our consumers every day and listening to what those new and innovative things are,” to make sure that Unilever’s *“amazing wheelhouse of innovators, RD scientists and brands ... work with the evolution of*

people's preferences, people's needs," she said.

Based on these conversations with consumers as well as Unilever's in-house expertise, Miller says that the company is focusing its innovation on three key areas: sustainability, health and community development. And, of course, flavor and fun.

Health & wellness moves beyond the individual to the community

Of these three, Miller sees the most potential to drive long-term growth by focusing on health and community development – both of which are at the foundation of Unilever's newest better-for-you ice cream brand Culture Republick.

The young brand, which officially launched at Natural Products Expo West after a soft launch in select areas, offers consumers the indulgence of ice cream made from skim milk, but with a healthy dose of probiotics.

The brand not only supports the gut's culture, but also community culture by donating 10% of its profits to the arts.

Culture Republick builds on the healthy foundation of probiotics with the addition of superfood ingredients that consumers want, but might not know how to enjoy, such as turmeric and chia.

The idea for the brand came in part from consumers, 75% of whom Miller said wanted brands that contribute to their well-being, which many define as their physical and mental health.

Unilever is also promoting health and wellness through new innovations under its Sir Kensington's line that showcased at Expo West, including vinaigrette and other condiments with non-GMO ingredients and other in-demand clean label claims.

Sustainability is woven into new products

Miller notes that brands focused on sustainability also have strong growth potential.

Indeed, recently published research from the Hartman Group found that consumer awareness of sustainability related to food and beverage has *"grown leaps and bounds"* in the past decade from about 56% in 2008 to 83% in 2017. Likewise, Hartman found that environmental and social concerns impact the purchasing decisions of more than a quarter of consumers and 22% say they have increased their sustainable purchasing this year.

With that in mind, Unilever is promoting the sustainability of its gelato brand Talenti and its tea brand Pukka.

"Talenti really stands for BPA-free and our pint-cycling program is really about how you take that jar and do more with it," Miller said.

Unilever is doing more with what is inside those jars, too. At Expo West it debuted Talenti Layers, which have five distinct layers of gelato, sauces, flakes, chunks and chips for an indulgent and instagrammable experience, Miller said.

At Natural Products Expo West, Unilever also launched two new products under its Ben & Jerry's brand, which has long been recognized as a leader in sustainability and as a business with a purpose.

These include cookie dough bites, which will be sold in the frozen section and allow consumers to play with one of their favorite ice cream ingredients, and a new cookie dough core pint, Miller said.

Unilever's new brand Growing Roots also focuses on improving sustainability, community and consumer health by offering organic, gluten-free and vegan snacks and giving 50% of its profits to urban agriculture.

These are just a few of the ways that Unilever is driving innovation and living its mission to offer products that taste good, feel good and are a force for good, said Miller, who assured there is much more coming from the company in terms of innovation.

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