

Expert insights

Flavor Creation: 9 Lessons in How to Win

Managing the creative flavor process

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Once a flavorist, always a flavorist! I have spent more time managing and directing than I have creating flavors over the past three decades, though I still believe I could put on my white coat, walk into the laboratory and make a better flavor than any of those whom I employ for the task.

Much has been written about the flavor creation process from a flavorist's perspective; however, our purpose here is to refrain from brainstorming the ultimate flavors and to focus more on managing the process. This takes the perspective of flavor creation management. Experience has shown that certain strategies work, and others do not. Consider the following statements:

"Customers know exactly what they want. They offer clear and concise articulation of how the flavor should taste and work in their product."

"Account managers are experts at capturing all the nuances of customer needs and recalling such details to the flavorists."

"Flavorists are fully attentive, focused, with an eye on the end results, deadlines and simple formulations."

If all of the above were true, then the need for managing the creative process would be easy and handled by a clerical staff or a computer program. However, experience tells me that this is not the case. Flavor creation is still very much a subjective process — open to interpretation. Managing this creative endeavor is paramount to avoid the waste of scarce resources.

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Lesson 1: Understand Your Customer

Creating a new flavor in isolation or because it would be nice to have one is no longer a practical strategy. Companies wish to harness valuable flavorist resources and focus them onto projects that can yield short-to-medium-term returns. Most companies have a portfolio or library of adequate flavors that perform for general customer applications. The value of the creative flavorist is to produce the "special" effect that hits the customer right between the eyes — before the next guy!

Managing the creative process requires a deep understanding of the capabilities, peculiarities and *modus operandi* of the flavorist, as well as probing the real needs of the customer, either directly or through the account executive. Flavorists can begin a project that consumes hours of activity, only to fail through simply overlooking a key factor at the beginning. For example, certain items need to be kosher, free from or soluble in specific flavor components. Making sure such data is in the hands of the flavorist is imperative. Extracting such information from the customer via account manager or directly from the customer is an



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Lesson 2: Understand the Capabilities of Your Flavorists

A flavorist team is only as good as its most recent success. Success is never guaranteed, but with continuous effort, the chances of it are more likely. From my experience, a good creative flavorist should be relatively spontaneous, open-minded, yet opinionated, and a maverick amongst the technical teams. Flavorists are like footballers (“soccer” and American). They are individuals with a specialized skill. They think they play better on their own, but in reality are more effective when used in a team. Managing flavorists requires an understanding of their skills and of the motivation they need. For example, one must know when to use an individual on a project and when to use two different people — “pass the ball,” so to speak.

Only by observing the approach and diligence of the flavorist can an opinion be formed and the team’s chances of success increased. Like a team sport, success breeds a confidence to win more, and good fla-

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vorists like to be on winning teams. More importantly, the good manager knows what works and why, how changes in organizational structure can be coped with and failures analyzed. Quick and sometimes harsh decisions have to be made in some cases to keep the team winning.

One last point: never underestimate the value of a “post-mortem.” Few managers take the time to really analyze why a product was chosen and why one was not. One reason may be the fear of upsetting the flavorists, which can lead to the undoing of a company!

Lesson 3: Nurture Creative Pride

There are many ways for flavorists to hone their creative forces. Some follow the continuous improvement route, taking what is available and building up on the shoul-

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ders of previous work. Some grasp new molecules and formulate creations around their characteristics. Others will work from a deep understanding of organic chemistry or biochemistry, using the natural world to determine their creative course. And the remainder may take the artistic approach, working from memory of essential molecules to fabricate their creation.

Regardless, each approach is valid and has a part to play in successful management of the creative process. Knowing the strengths and weaknesses of the flavorist allows for allocation of the right projects, resulting in faster completion.

Regular introduction of new molecules in a systematic and formal assessment method creates useful competition between flavorists, allowing the boundaries to be pushed and each person to showcase their creative pride.

Steady feeding of technical articles, analytical data and new discoveries provides the flavorist with information and prevents staleness from creeping in. The importance of nurturing the creative mind should not

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be underestimated. The management process successfully balances this creative hunger for freedom with the tight constraints of the commercial project.

Lesson 4: Recognize "Stuckness"

For anyone in the management of creative talent in a subjective area, I would recommend reading Robert Pirsig's "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance." The book offers insight into the project management process where subjectivity and creative beings are concerned.

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challenge their ability, but can easily get into "stuck" situations, especially when duplication work is involved or a special customer nuance is required.

Poor management of the creative flow can easily overlook this stuckness. I offer this exchange between manager and flavorist:

"How's the project going? Are we nearly ready to submit?"

"Almost, just needs a few modifications."

This scenario all too often results in project failure. Proud flavorists hate to admit defeat. I cannot stress

this enough: manage this process, identify the stuck points and get involved. Nothing is better than tasting a flavor with the flavorist and the formulation in front of you both to keep the project on track.

Stuck points are good because they stretch the capabilities. However, they are often fatal to a project if not recognized. Good management will win the confidence of the flavorist to open up and discuss before all the project time is elapsed. Shared problems can be broken down into bite-sized problems and overcome.

Lesson 5: Be Aware of Formulation Processes

Success of the flavor in a food product comes down to how it is delivered to the consumer's nose and mouth. The formulation is the key to this success. Although this is an obvious statement, not enough management

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interest is shown in how it was derived and built up. It is important for a company to record this knowledge. Why are these ingredients used and not others? What is so special about the blending sequence? Have you thought of using this instead of that?

The secret workings of the flavor creation process needs exposing along the way. Record why an ingredient was used and its effect. Record each time a formula is put forward for assessment and the verdict. These records help the management process. They do not hinder creativity; they merely help prevent re-invention or wheel spinning. They also identify the good formulations along the way that will be useful for other projects of a more generic nature. The records also allow for the flavor to be revisited later if improvement or change is required, even by another flavorist.

Lesson 6: Complexity — the More the Better?

People ask me why flavorists create such complex formulations, making their flavors time-consuming to produce, heavy on inventory and future raw material redundancy. Many duplication projects use complex formulations in an attempt to recreate the palettes of the original designers. Another approach uses keys and building blocks, using blends of complex blends to the point where many of the molecules are below the point of detection. (I have experienced a formulation that when exploded fully into its components and printed on paper weighed 120 g, and even required



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some of final flavor as an ingredient in itself — the ultimate alchemists snake).

Managing the complexity is a challenge best done outside the normal flavorist activities, preferably left to an individual who is motivated by the challenge of simplification, who will diligently simplify without losing the original character. One of the exciting challenges of managing the creative process is to balance the pressure on flavorists to keep things simple with their urge to create freely, without reaching the point of disagreement.

Lesson 7: Handling Account Manager Insecurity

If flavorists are the football players and goal scorers, then account managers are the game arrangers. Their customers may select the venue, size and shape of the “field,” but account managers influence the time, date and conditions under which the game is played, and therefore can increase goal-scoring chances.

Account managers and flavorists need a close relationship if the creative process is to work. This is where management of the process is essential. The drive and incentive of the sales manager for fast, first-hit success can clash with the take-time-to-

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get-it-right approach of the flavorist.

Without facilitation here, half-finished products get to customers or deadlines are never met and competitors’ products win. The flavorist team can make or break an account manager. Managing expectations and the process flow of a project is another way of ensuring greater success. In these days of remote account managers and computer-driven project management systems, close oral liaison is essential if frustration and failure is to be avoided.

Lesson 8: the Support Groups — Analytical and Sensory Support

The creative process needs to have access to good instrumental analytical support. GC/MS is a great tool for identifying what’s in what, but unless the flavorist is a clever organic chemist or the analyst is a great communicator, the whole benefit of this process can be wasted.

Flavorists grab results and run off adding every little compound, including artifacts and products of “aging in the bottle,” complaining that they cannot source a particular acetal, epoxide or ester, expecting the end result to be a perfect replica only to be disappointed with the results and blame the analyst.

Analysts, on the other hand, will view flavorists with awe and not dare to critique the analysis before handing it over. If not careful, the whole process degenerates into analysis followed by creation, ignoring the

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results, but with the comfort that the results are here if challenged later.

The same holds true for sensory analysis. Sophisticated quantitative descriptive analysis of flavors during the creative process helps keep a flavorist on track with the customer need. But far too often sensory analysis becomes a tool for passing on responsibility if not managed tightly. “The sensory group said it was OK to send, therefore I am not responsible for its failure.” The sensory team becomes a gatekeeper, to the point where a flavorist forgets about the customer need and is only trying to get the creation through sensory.

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Lesson 9: Encouraging Applications Respect

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A strategy to manage the dynamic tension between flavorists and the applications team is another tool for success. Bringing the groups together as key parts of the overall creative process is important to avoid a perpetual game of tennis between the groups.

Harness the skills of the applications team to show a flavor in its best light. Involve the flavorist in tasting and review. Critique both flavor and product in an open way before submission to the customer. If a flavor is to be submitted within a product, the creative process must be continued through to its application. Make sure the applications team knows what the customer expects of the flavor in the product.

We all have experienced presentations when exceptionally crafted products demonstrate the culinary skills of the applications team, but do nothing to dem-

onstrate the flavor. Encourage dialogue between flavorists in a “flavor language” that they both understand.

In Conclusion

I hope this article has outlined some of the strategies for successfully managing the flavor creation process within the business context. Commercial wins still depend on the customer approving the final creation, but following some of these strategies can increase the chances. The creative manager should be a thick-skinned facilitator, steering the projects from start to finish, keeping the creative spirit active and the hungry account manager fed, directing daily conflict and tension in a positive way, deriving enjoyment from the experience!

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