



Matthias Guentert

Flavor companies and customers partner in supporting healthier solutions.

“Consumers want better-for-you products—less sodium, fat and sugar—yet they want to enjoy the taste of food and beverages,” says Matthias

Guentert, president of Symrise’s North American Flavor and Nutrition Division (F&N). “One important driver is the aging of the population.” So, even as consumers seek products with the promise of well-being that impart “vitality and rejuvenation,” they continue to have high organoleptic expectations. It is at this intersection of health/nutrition and good taste where Guentert and his F&N colleagues operate as partners in customers’ flavor and product development processes. Symrise’s flavor and nutrition activities in part focus on what Guentert describes as “food plus” and “food minus,” reflecting the use of technologies and ingredients to variously enhance sweet or salt impressions or mask off notes resulting from the application of functional ingredients. It can also mean the active use of functional health ingredients. This spectrum of solutions falls under the umbrella of the company’s Taste for Life product development platform, which allows customers to place products somewhere on the grid between health and enjoyment. Taste for Life encompasses functional value (Stay Vital), nutritional balance (Lighten Up), natural quality (Be Natural), authentic experience/full-bodied flavor (Just Enjoy) and added sensorial impact (Get Excited). “This is where the customer and Symrise can meet at the same level,” says Guentert, whose career has afforded him a unique perspective on the evolving relationship between flavor houses and their customers. Guentert’s career with various iterations of Symrise—based in the Holzminden, Germany headquarters and, for the last 12 years, in the United States—has lasted 25 years, including experience in fundamental research, applied analytical research, flavor development and innovations, quality control, regulatory, and supply chain. “Many years ago, when I was still in product development, I never thought we would be doing the type of marketing and consumer insight studies that we started doing about 10 years ago,” he says. “There was a big paradigm shift.” The global players in the flavor industry “have reached a different level of cooperation” with customers, he adds. “It has become much more multidisciplinary over the years. In addition to calling on product developers and procurement, there is nowadays open innovation with scientists, marketing and brand

managers [involved]. This comes in addition to the fact that food safety and compliance have become a lot more important. Consequently, many of these products supporting health and wellness are custom-made solutions. You have to partner early on in the new product development process to develop the best solution for the challenge.” And so, says Guentert, navigating the complexities of, say, human bitter receptors has led the flavor business in a new direction that in effect counteracts commoditization. “Some years ago you could still distinguish yourself with a different strawberry flavor by using certain captive materials that others didn’t have access to,” he notes. “That might still be the case in some situations today, but not very often. Now you have to distinguish yourself by understanding the consumers’ taste expectations for our customers’ brands in order to develop the right technology platforms.” Meanwhile, Guentert notes that geography, too, affects the type and range of solutions it provides in the health and wellness arena. “The needs of consumers are very different from region to region and even country to country,” he explains. “Eating habits, geography, socioeconomic status, gender, age, religion and perhaps even genetic disposition—to a certain degree—play a role.” He continues, “When it comes to health and wellness, there is a big difference between developing and developed markets. When you think of obesity, as an important example, it has become one of the biggest topics in the United States and other developed markets.” And so, he says, “The need for salt-reduced, fat-reduced and sugar-reduced [products] is very big in a country like the United States compared to a developing country. While sugar is still valued [and needed] as a macronutrient in developing economies, it is considered one of the root causes for various diseases in the Western world. He adds, “The big advantage that global companies have is they can be active in all regions and play to the different demands.” He says that this breadth of knowledge allows Symrise to set its five-year strategy for corporate research in anticipation of future consumers’ needs. Acknowledging that health and wellness “is not something that’s going away,” high on Guentert’s list for future needs are: masking materials to combat the bitterness, astringency and off notes associated with emerging functional ingredients; functional botanical extracts in service of natural positioning; and proprietary functional ingredients. Even as ongoing research addresses healthy flavor solutions for customers and consumers, Guentert notes that the flavor industry will continue to be ruled by the dichotomy of healthy positioning and low-cost, less healthy options. “As it relates to healthy foods and beverages, you are looking at growth rates in the neighborhood of 7-8%,” he says. “There’s a reason for that—the consumer is willing to pay more for those products.” At the same time, the ongoing trend of indulgent food—benefiting from the pleasantness of high fat, salt and sugar content—will pull in the opposite direction. This demand will be driven in part by low-cost convenience items such as those offered in chain restaurants. “If you want to come out with a breakfast [food item] for a low-cost budget, there are limitations to make it very healthy,” says Guentert. “There will always be other low-cost segments that will not be able to follow the [health and wellness] trend.” Servicing the different strains of consumer trends is key to future success. Hence, says Guentert, it is of strategic importance for Symrise to set the right focus early by anticipating future consumers’ needs.

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