

A Stale Pitch

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My father commented a couple of years ago on the overuse of the word "fresh" in all kinds of retail settings, and of course I promptly agreed.

But in the past year or so, as the word has become even more widely used -- and misused -- I've begun to wonder if this powerful and evocative description even means anything to consumers anymore. Has the unbridled enthusiasm for the word in all kinds of marketing pitches diluted its abilities? After all, anything that's made to order now is fresh. Foods can be fresh frozen. Toothpaste and mouthwash are fresh. Even beer is fresh.

Fads come and go in marketing, of course. Remember a few years ago when the big rage was products that were "clear"? These days the popular color choice for all manner of names seems to be blue. Two years from now it'll be something else.

But fresh is hanging around. It has staying power. And, more important, its ubiquity does not seem to be diminishing its effectiveness. The reason for that appears to be that consumers have decided fresh means a lot of different things, depending on the circumstances and the product. What's more, people seem willing to give food companies -- whether we're talking about restaurants, supermarkets or manufacturers -- the benefit of the doubt about when or whether something can be called fresh.

That's especially interesting given that consumers today are generally more skeptical about advertising and marketing claims than they used to be. But when shoppers want something badly enough, they will embrace it in whatever form it's offered. And the nation's growing interest in better-for-you food, whether organic, low-carb, low-fat or unprocessed, is giving *fresh* a whole new life.

"Maybe it's a buzzword because people feel guilty about not having freshness in their lives," said S.B. Master, president of Master-McNeil Inc., a corporate naming and branding firm in Berkeley, Calif. "What could be better than fresh? It's like love. It's a desirable thing to have."

Sure it's understandable, but it seems a bit like a slippery slope.

Analysts at the food-industry consulting firm Technomic Inc. have studied the word "fresh" extensively for clients interested in using the term. What they've found is that fresh has moved far beyond its roots as, simply, the opposite of "frozen." Now, fresh can indeed mean just about anything -- and all of it is seen as good.

"Fresh equates very strongly with quality, and what fresh means to the consumer doesn't necessarily mean that a product has never been frozen or is not processed -- it means high quality," said Joe Pawlak, a senior principal with Technomic, based in Chicago. The word simply has a "healthy connotation" now, he said.

So at restaurants that may use processed or frozen ingredients, it's still okay to trot out the tagline "fresh" if the final presentation is a meal that was just made or simply looks fresh. As consumers, we often check our skepticism at the door and convince ourselves that we're doing something healthy because we know we should be.

For retailers and food producers, that lure is strong. What could be better than a feel-good phrase that ignites few or no questions from the consumer? Hence, Fresh Choice, Baja Fresh, freshgo, Fresh Market, Fresh Express and so on.

Fresh is not a new concept, of course. When Mark Ordan founded Fresh Fields, the local chain of natural supermarkets that was later bought by Whole Foods, he said the name was designed to represent everything that was not processed. "What we meant by fresh was trying to find things that were wonderful on their own."

The Fresh Fields name was eventually absorbed into Whole Foods, and Ordan went on to start a chain of lunch cafes in downtown Washington called High Noon. He recently bought the former Sutton Place Gourmet chain of markets, which has changed its name to Balducci's, from the venerable New York market it had bought earlier. But the word fresh is very much at play in his new ventures, as well. When you're making potato latkes, he said, calling them "fresh" gives the impression that there's a grandmother in the back churning them out. Putting the word on just about any product, in fact, is good business.

"It helps -- as long as it's true," Ordan said.

But what is truly fresh? There actually is some regulation of the term by the Food and Drug Administration. The FDA's actions on fresh actually began decades ago, when it ruled that companies could not call something "fresh tomato juice" if in fact it was a canned product. The rules are still pretty strict, according to the Code of Federal Regulation, Title 21, Vol. 2, last revised in April of this year.

On packaged foods, the term fresh means that "the food is in its raw state and has not been frozen or subjected to any form of thermal processing or any other form of preservation," the code says. There are exceptions for fresh foods that have been "flash frozen," and provisions made for the addition of wax coatings, pesticides, chlorine washes and even radiation.

Of course, there are lots of areas not covered by the FDA, and marketers continue to push the boundaries of this term. Last year we were introduced to the concept of "fresh" beer by the folks at Budweiser, which has made the claim one of the cornerstones of its marketing efforts. The pitch? That a bottle of Budweiser is, on average, only 35 days old when it gets to store shelves -- bottles even sport a "born on" date -- which the company claims is a much shorter time frame than the competition's passage from bottling plant to market.

The Budweiser.com Web site prominently features the company's Think Fresh Drink Fresh

theme, while a TV commercial for the brew ends with the claim, "Fresh Beer Tastes Better." Apparently, we accept the idea that a beer is fresh because it was bottled 35 days ago. It makes me wonder if there's anything we *will* question.

To be fair, it's true that all kinds of food companies are offering better-quality and fresher ingredients. Consumer taste levels and demands are rising. But our interest in picking, buying or making something that is really, truly fresh is actually waning. According to the NPD Group's "Eating Patterns in America" report, 51 percent of Americans surveyed in 2003 completely agreed with the statement "It's important for food to be fresh when you buy it." But that was down from the 71 percent of those surveyed who felt that way in 1985. And while 47.9 percent of main meals eaten at home in 2003 included a fresh product, that was down from 55 percent in 1986.

Fresh takes time and effort, and we don't want to give up either in our pursuit of fresh. Instead, increasingly, we're letting ourselves believe that we're getting something fresh just because they say so.

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