

DIPPING IN WITH
TORTILLA CHIPS



Contract Testing Inc.



INTRODUCTION

Snack foods have been one of the fastest growing product categories in the Canadian market and competition is fierce. The updates we have seen in snack foods over the past few years include nutritional focused benefits, artisan or upscale brand extensions, and bold new flavour varieties that particularly resonate with youthful demographics. Tortilla chips are no exception to these fast moving trends in snack food.

Not too long ago, tortilla chips were mainly associated with Mexican restaurants as the perfect accompaniment to the popular Margarita. But nowadays they are practically a staple in the family pantry and account for a good chunk of the salty snack category - and why not? Whether the base for a heaping plate of nachos on game day, dipped into your favorite salsa or hummus, or eaten plain out of the bag - tortilla chips are as versatile as they are delicious!

We recently dove into this category to explore the waters and take a closer look at the sensory profiles of six popular brands of tortilla chips.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We asked 50 females from the Greater Toronto Area to taste six brands of tortilla chips including both National and Private Label brands, with an even sample of both round and triangular shaped chips. The unbranded products were presented in varied order with a 3 digit code and were first evaluated plain, followed by a shorter evaluation of attributes with salsa.



Before the snacking began, we asked a few questions about purchase behaviour in this category. Brand loyalty was almost equally divided, with 52% claiming that they buy the same one or two brands every time, while the rest buy many different brands. Among those who are most brand loyal, 65% say it's because it is the best tasting chip for them. Among those who are not brand loyal, it's most likely because they feel that all brands taste similar or because they need to buy whatever brand is on sale.

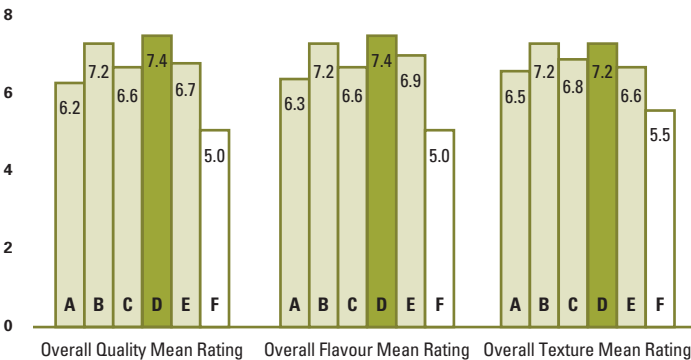
Figure 1 – Brand Choice for Tortilla Chip Purchases

When it comes to purchasing tortilla chips, what best describes your behaviour?					
I buy the same one or two brands every time	52%	➡	Because it has the best taste for me	65%	
			Because it is the best value to me	23%	
			Because it is most available where I shop	12%	
I am not loyal to a specific brand, I buy many different brands	48%	➡	Because they all taste similar	38%	
			Because I need to buy what's on sale	38%	
			Other	25%	

MAKING A SPLASH

Two of our six samples (products B & D) emerged as distinct winners in our brand array. Both brands achieved all performance hurdles for the salty snack category, with very impressive scores on key performance measures such as Overall Quality (Fig 2).

Figure 2 – Overall Quality, Flavour and Texture Mean Rating



Diagnostically, these winning brands stood apart as having both the best overall flavour and the best overall texture (Fig 2). From a flavour standpoint, close to a third of our respondents awarded these brands with top ratings (9 out of 9) on our flavour scales. They were also the most natural tasting and had a more pleasant aftertaste than the rest of the pack.

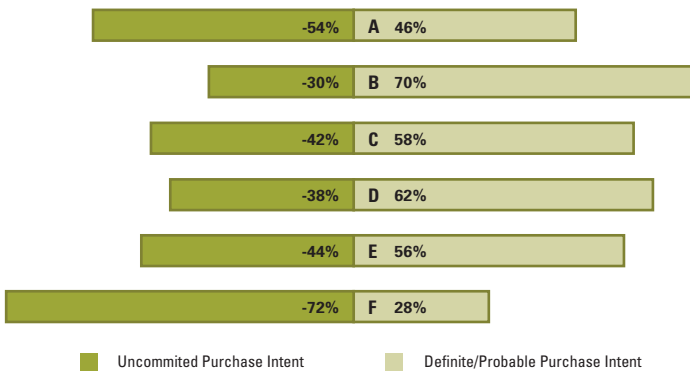
These two winners also stood apart for having the ideal crispness, even though they differed slightly on thickness with one being slightly too thin, and the other slightly too thick. They were also both slightly too light in colour and neither had the perfect size (one was too big and one was too small), but these issues were not liabilities.



SINKING CHIPS

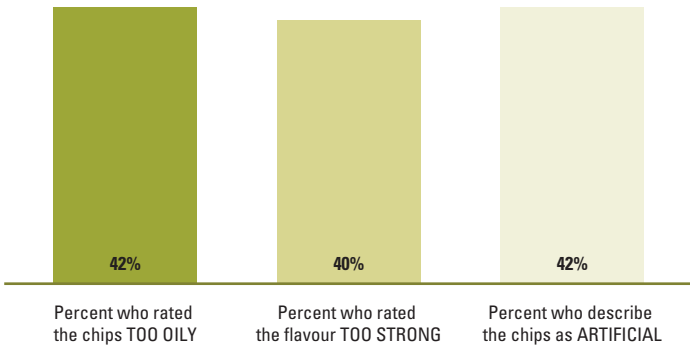
Our runner-up brands (A, C, and E) may not have reached the heights of our two winning brands but they still performed fairly well, with few significant differences between them. However, there was one brand in our mix, product F, which posted lacklustre scores on all key measures. Purchase Intent for product F was well below par in this category, with only 28% top two box purchase intent (Fig 3). It's fair to say that this brand was the lone bottom feeder of the bunch and is desperately in need of a facelift.

Figure 3 – Purchase Intent



And although this chip had many problems, the main culprit was oiliness. The very oily feel of this chip also lent itself to a very unpleasant aftertaste and more 'unnatural' character of flavour.

Figure 4 – Brand F



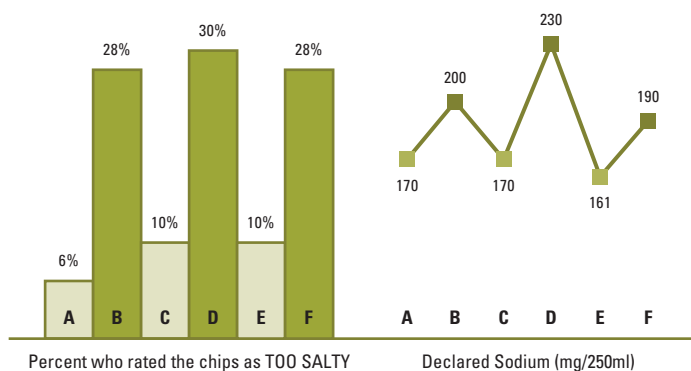
SALTY WATERS

Our six samples were fairly close in declared sodium levels ranging from 7-10% of recommended daily sodium (per 50g). But despite this narrow range, our saltiest samples (B, D, & F) were accurately identified by our respondents to have the saltiest flavour, and were too salty for around a third of respondents. Interestingly however, our two top performing brands (B & D) were among these saltier options.

Consumers are typically very good discriminators on this aspect of flavour, and this product test was no exception. And while sodium may not be the most popular word in our food culture these days, in this test, very moderate differences in saltiness actually separated the good from the mediocre in terms of flavour delivery.



Figure 5 – Declared Sodium and Brands Perceived as Too Salty



CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Decisions in the snack food aisles are often made quickly and price is certainly a big driver of brand choice. In fact, close to forty percent of our tortilla chip consumers admitted to having little brand loyalty and usually choose a brand that's on sale. On the other hand, over half of our testers claim to be loyal to one or two specific tortilla chip brands, mainly because these brands have a taste they prefer. Even in a highly impulsive and price driven category, product credentials are top of mind. So why not ensure that consumers have no reason to rule you out of their purchase decision?

We may just be skimming the surface, but our results show that within our pool of regular, full-flavoured tortilla chip brands, when it comes to product performance

CHIP SHAPE

While our testers generally prefer a round shaped Tortilla Chip over any other (Fig 6), the shape of the chip whether round or triangle, did not have any obvious bearing on overall performance of our six products. In fact, we had one of each in our winning pair. However, there was one aspect which was clearly tied to shape - round chips were significantly easier to dip into the salsa than triangle shapes (Fig 7).

Figure 6 – Tortilla Chip Shape Preference

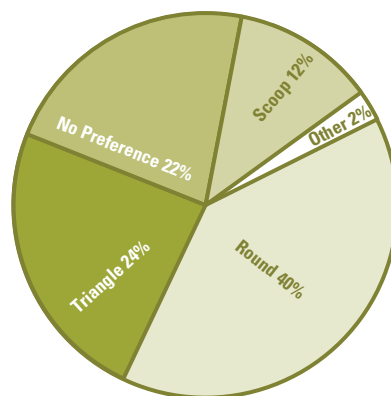
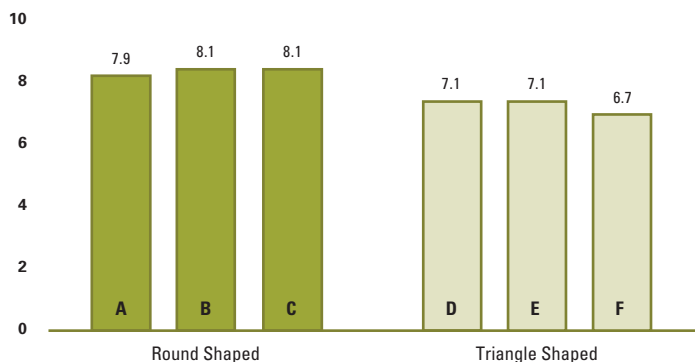


Figure 7 – Ease of Dipping Mean Rating



a couple are making a splash, a few are treading water, and one is clearly sinking... product renovation could be the answer to help keep this brand afloat.

For questions about this research, or how you can leverage consumer taste buds in your business, contact Andrew Scholes at andrew.scholes@contracttesting.com.

Contract Testing Inc. is an industry leader in sensory evaluation and consumer product testing. We are the only sensory evaluation and consumer product research company with corporately managed test sites in both Canada and the United States. With 30 years of experience, we are innovators in testing with consumers across all major food, beverage and household and personal care categories.



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