

Taste is key in promoting insect-based food

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A new study finds that promoting insect-based food as pleasurable, rather than healthy or environmentally friendly, could be the most effective marketing strategy for these currently taboo or unappealing foods. Published in *Frontiers in Nutrition* as part of a special research collection on food systems, the study is the first to compare promotional methods for insect-based food. Promoting insects as tasty, or even as a luxurious and exotic delicacy, could help to change attitudes and achieve more sustainable food production and healthier diets.

Food production accounts for an enormous 25% of all human [greenhouse gas emissions](#). Livestock is a huge contributor to these emissions and researchers and policymakers are trying to develop and promote more sustainable ways to produce [animal protein](#). One controversial option is farming and eating insects.

"Insects have numerous health benefits as a source of protein and dramatically outperform conventional meats in terms of greenhouse gas emissions," said Professor Sebastian Berger, of the University of Bern in Switzerland. "Therefore, insect-based [food](#) might help in the fight against climate change."

Despite these benefits, people in Western countries rarely eat insects. Many people are wary or even disgusted at the thought of eating insect-based food. However, many of these same people will happily eat a lobster or crayfish, despite their insect-like appearance—so it is possible such attitudes can change.

So far, no-one had investigated the best way to promote or market insects so that they are more appealing to the public. Highlighting their health and environmental benefits seems like an intuitive way to do this, as social labels such as "eco-friendly" or "fair trade" have appealed to consumers in the past.

Berger and colleagues set out to investigate the factors influencing people's attitudes towards insect-based food. They asked members of the public in Cologne, Germany, to participate in the study. First, the participants viewed an advertisement for a company offering insect-based food. Some of the advertisements aimed to highlight the environmental or health benefits of the food, while others highlighted pleasurable aspects, such as its taste.

Then, the participants had the option to eat a mealworm chocolate truffle. They completed a questionnaire to record their expectations about the truffle quality and whether they were willing to try it. Those who tried the truffle also rated how nice it tasted.

Surprisingly, the research team found that advertisements promoting health and environmental benefits were significantly less effective than those promoting pleasurable aspects of the food. Claims of quality and luxury enhanced the participants' expectations of the truffle and made them more likely to try it. These participants also rated the taste of the truffles more highly.

So, why may insects differ from other products where social issues have positively influenced sales? Long-term social considerations, such as environmental protection or improved health, don't appear to be enough for consumers to overcome the insect "disgust" factor. As people's aversion towards [insects](#) is largely emotional rather than rational, it makes sense to try to influence their emotions rather than make rational appeals about long-term issues.

The team's results suggest that future marketing campaigns should portray insect-based food as delicious, trendy or even luxurious, if they are to effectively change people's eating habits. Further larger studies are needed to establish if a large-scale switch from conventional animal protein to insect-based foods is feasible.

More information: Sebastian Berger et al, When Utilitarian Claims Backfire: Advertising Content and the Uptake of Insects as Food, *Frontiers in Nutrition* (2018). [DOI: 10.3389/fnut.2018.00088](https://doi.org/10.3389/fnut.2018.00088)

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