Summer 2021

Instagram for the marketing of plant-based food products in key overseas markets

Mieke Marsden – *Pūhoro STEM Academy Intern*

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	**3**
WHAT DID WE DO?	**4**
WHAT DID WE FIND?	**4**
TASTE CLAIMS IN A BRAND'S INSTAGRAM CONTENT	
HEALTH AND SUSTAINABILITY CLAIMS IN A BRANDS INSTAGRAM CONTENT	
THE EMPHASIS ON PROTEIN WITHIN THE CONTENT BRANDS POST	
TYPE OF CONTENT BRANDS TYPICALLY USE	
WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?	**9**
KEY MESSAGE	**10**
APPENDIX 1 PLANT-BASED BRANDS IN THE USA	**11**
APPENDIX 2 SOME INSTAGRAM TIPS	**16**

INTRODUCTION

There is increasing interest in New Zealand and overseas in foods based on emerging protein sources. Emerging Proteins NZ (EPNZ) is a community that seeks to accelerate the development of a thriving emerging proteins sector in New Zealand. Members span the sector from growing and producing through to manufacturing, retailing and exporting; new technologies and new market insights. The community enables members to share knowledge, get connected with the right expertise and facilities and work together on common projects.

This proof of concept study was undertaken to provide EPNZ members with insights into the current use of Instagram for the marketing of plant-based food products in key overseas markets in order to help with any future overseas social media marketing campaigns they may undertake.

WHAT DID WE DO?

The brands included in this project were identified using a variety of methods. These included tracking relevant hashtags on Instagram, following endorsements from other Instagram users, identification of brands and companies from a range of different publications, and google search results from relevant terms.

Confirmation was sought that the products were plant-based and commercially available. Data was then extracted and entered into a spreadsheet for further analysis. If the brand (or their parent company) had an Instagram page, a representative post was chosen for evaluation.

It is important to note that this is a proof-of-concept study, and not intended to be a representative sample of all international brands in the emerging proteins sector. However, the sample size of approximately 100 brands is considered sufficient to be able to draw some useful conclusions from the data.

WHAT DID WE FIND?

A total of 101 brands were selected for this study (Table 1). Although the study was open to brands from any country, there were more plant-based brands using Instagram in the USA than anywhere else. Other countries were grouped by region for the purposes of this evaluation.

A brief summary of each brand from the USA is provided in Appendix 1.

Table 1: Brands included in the assessment by region

Region	Brand Logo	Brands that did not have a clear logo
USA (21)		- Eat Just - Hilary's
China (11)		- Be & Cherry - Jinzi - Baicaowei
UK + Europe (38)		- Gold and Green - Wonder Burger - ME-AT - A2O - Plant Menu
Australia + Asia (22)		- Plantet Food - Vegetari Healthy Bites - Supersun
Other (9)		- Okaraina - NOT MEAT

Taste-related claims are the most popular.

A key consideration with any form of marketing is what messages will best connect with the prospective consumers. There are many reasons why people may choose plant-based food products, and so the Instagram posts were analysed to look at what types of claims different brands included. The three most popular types of claims were to do with taste, sustainability and health (Table 2).

There was a consistent emphasis on the taste of products throughout the posts, with over half of the brands emphasising how tasty their product is in the content they posted. This suggests that consumers, regardless of where in the world they are located, are perceived by plant-based food brands to be more likely to respond positively to products where they have been reassured that they taste great – no matter how biased the post is likely to be when coming from the brand that makes the product!

Although health aspects are commonly reported as being a driver for consumers choosing plant-based products, there was relatively little health-based messaging in the posts. The USA had the highest number of health related statements (28% of posts), which may reflect its more open regulatory environment regarding health claims and messaging. It is also possible that Instagram is not generally perceived by the brands as the appropriate channel for communication of health messaging to consumers.

There were very few sustainability related claims in the posts (10% of all posts). This was surprising considering the increasing focus of the discussion on climate change, sustainability and the benefit of plant-based eating.

It would be interesting to undertake further study to better understand the decision making behind the choices regarding the key messages within Instagram posts – is it a reflection of the specific consumers who tend to use Instagram, the limitations of the particular channel (amount of text / time spent viewing each post etc.), regulatory considerations, or other drivers.

Table 2: Claim types within Instagram posts by region

Region	Health Related Claims	Sustainable Related Claims	Taste Related Claims
USA	28%	17%	72%
China	0%	0%	0%
UK + Europe	2%	14%	54%
Asia + Australia	17%	33%	50%
Other	11%	22%	44%

Limited reference to protein.

Out of more than 100 plant-based brands, only 16 of these brands included any sort of content about protein in their Instagram posts. This included any mention of protein, including on images of the product packaging, hashtags, captions of photos, brand descriptions, general comments, brand names and other text on the page.

This was surprising given the increasing awareness of protein and the apparent increase in popularity of higher protein diets.

The decision by businesses not to be more explicit regarding protein could reflect their market research or customer feedback suggesting that protein is not so important in plant-based products. Or it could reflect a bias arising from the nature of the Instagram platform. Instagram users tend to be flicking through many posts fairly rapidly. They are likely to be looking for attractive food and products, meal ideas and inspiration and quick, bite-sized reviews. Instagram is unlikely to be the key platform for a consumer to find detailed information about a product, but more of a starting point from which interested people can then go elsewhere to learn more. Words such as 'tastes good', 'delicious', 'mouth-watering' are more emotionally charged than 'high in protein' and thus may be more successful in attracting more of a consumers interest.

General health-related claims were significantly more common than mentions of protein. This suggests that other aspects of health are currently considered more relevant or appealing to consumers considering plant-based foods than protein in isolation.

Food images tend to show the product ready to eat.

The project also considered what types of images of the food products were used in the posts. These were either packaged product (shown in its packaging as it would look at point of purchase) or unpackaged products (removed from the packaging and often shown as part of a meal with other components, plated up and ready to eat) or a combination of the two (Table 3).

The majority of brands (86%) showed the food product unpackaged in some way, with over half of these also including the packaging within the image. Presumably this reflects the priority of messaging around taste, with consumers more likely to find the food appetising and engaging compared to only an image of a packet.

Presumably the incorporation of the packaging alongside the product is seen by brands as a way of boosting product recognition when potential consumers look for the product in a supermarket among increasing numbers of similar products. However, but this is obviously secondary to getting the consumer interested in buying the product in the first place.

Recipes, meal ideas and videos showing food preparation were also common in posts by brands who seemed to be more sophisticated in their use of Instagram.

Table 3: Content types within Instagram posts by region

Region	Packaged Product	Unpackaged Product	Packaged and Unpackaged Product
USA	12%	47%	41%
China	0%	100%	0%
UK + Europe	14%	34%	52%
Asia + Australia	17%	33%	50%
Other	8%	50%	42%

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

This analysis of Instagram posts suggests that plant-based brands are prioritising the communication of taste and enjoyment of eating. This was the same across all regions studied.

The lack of direct mentions to health, sustainability and protein were surprising given the high profile these aspects have in the general sector. This may indicate that Instagram users have different areas of interest compared to other plant-based consumers, but this instinctively seems unlikely. It may simply reflect the specific constraints of the Instagram platform, with short and simple posts to account for the limited attention span and appetite for detailed information of the users.

Most posts are using images of the food products out of the packaging and ready to eat. Consumers want to know what it looks like, how it tastes and ideally how they might make it into a meal. Videos and recipes in the description section of the posts also appear to increase engagement.

If a brand is considering marketing to the USA, it is worth noting that this is the most popular region for health-related claims. This could be a reflection of the particular interests of consumers in that region, but could also be influenced by the less constrained regulatory environment regarding health claims within the USA.

There was only 1 Chinese brand in the study that had an Instagram account. This is not really surprising considering Instagram is banned in China.

Some of the Instagram tips are summarised visually in Appendix 2.

KEY MESSAGE

Should NZ companies be contemplating advertising their plant-based foods to international consumers using Instagram, the typical approach taken by their competitors is to talk about the great taste of the product and provide appetising images of the food served up and ready to eat. Additional information in the form of an image of the packaged food, recipe ideas and videos are common among those brands making good use of Instagram.

APPENDIX 1: PLANT-BASED BRANDS IN THE USA

Almond Cow

Founded: 2016

Location: Atlanta, Georgia

Type(s) of Products: Plant–based Milk

Website: https://almondcow.co

Beyond Meat

Founded: 2009

Location: El Segundo, California

Type(s) of Products: Plant–based Burgers, Sausages and Chicken

Website: https://www.beyondmeat.com

Eat Just

Parent Company: Just Eat Takeaway

Founded: 2011

Location: San Francisco, California

Type(s) of Products: Egg and Egg-based product alternatives

Website: https://www.ju.st

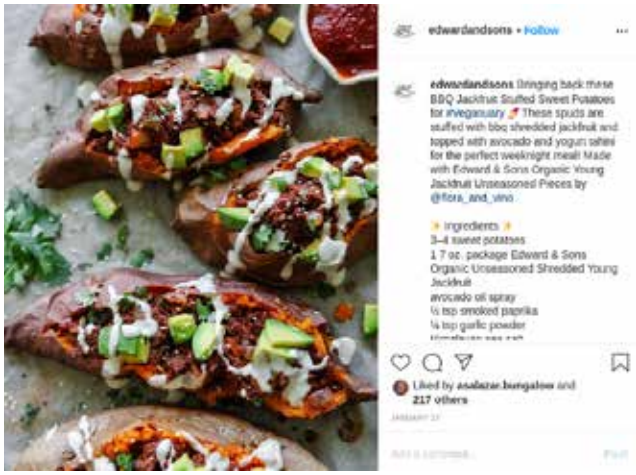
Edward and Sons

Founded: 1978

Location: Carpinteria, California

Type(s) of Products: A variety of foods

Website: https://store.edwardandsons.com



Good Catch

Parent Company: Gathered Foods

Founded: 2016

Location: Newtown, Pensilvania

Type(s) of Products: Tuna, Crab and Fish Alternatives

Website: https://goodcatchfoods.com

Hilary's Eat Well

Founded: 2006

Location: Lawrence, Kansas

Type(s) of Products: Burgers, Sausages, Bites and Salad dressings

Website: https://hilaryseatwell.com

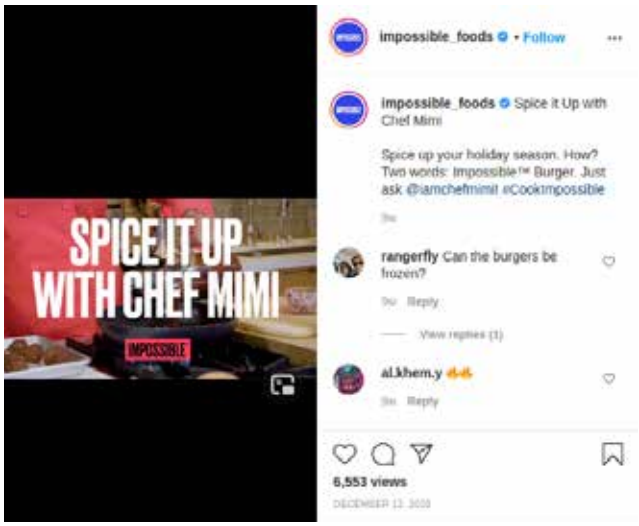
Impossible Foods

Founded: 2011

Location: Redwood City, California

Type(s) of Products: Meat, Diary and Fish Alternatives

Website: https://impossiblefoods.com



Lightlife

Parent Company: Maple Leaf Foods

Founded: 2013

Location: Braintree, Massachussetts

Type(s) of Products: Burgers, Deli 'Meat', Sausages, Tempeh

Website: https://lightlife.com

Loma Linda

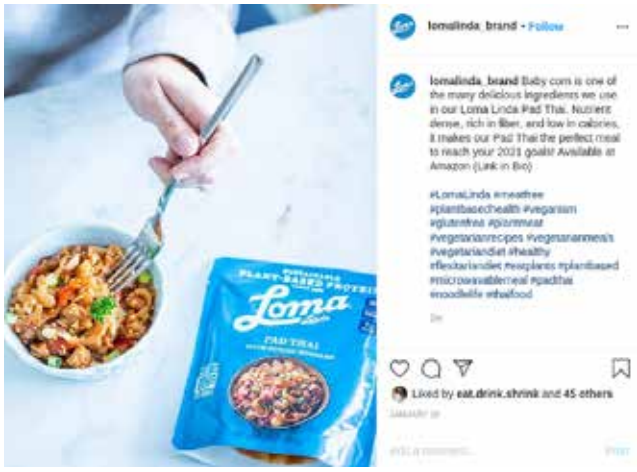
Parent Company: Atlantic Natural Foods

Founded: 1890

Location: Nashville, North Carolina

Type(s) of Products: Variety of Meat Alternatives

Website: https://atlanticnaturalfoods.com/loma-linda/



Miyoko's Creamery

Founded: 2014

Location: Petaluma, California

Type(s) of Products: Cheese and Butter Alternatives

Website: https://atlanticnaturalfoods.com/

Nasoya Foods

Founded: 2016

Location: Ayer, Massachusetts

Type(s) of Products: Tofu and plant–based Asian foods

Website: https://www.nasoya.com

New Wave

Founded: 2015

Location: Stamford, Connecticut

Type(s) of Products: Algae and plant–based Seafood alternatives

Website: https://www.newwavefoods.com

Ozo

Parent Company: JBS U.S.A

Founded: 2020

Location: Lafayette, Colorado

Type(s) of Products: Meatballs, Sausages, Mince, Burgers

Website: https://ozofoods.com

Raised and Rooted

Parent Company: Tyson Foods Inc.

Founded: 2019

Location: Springdale, Arkansas

Type(s) of Products: Nuggets, Fries and other Meat Alternatives

Website: https://www.raisedandrooted.com

Tofurky

Founded: 1980

Location: Hood River, Oregon

Type(s) of Products: Turkey Meat Alternative

Website: https://tofurky.com

Unreal Deli

Founded: 2019

Location: Los Angeles, California

Type(s) of Products: Plan-based Deli Meals

Website: https://unrealdeli.com

Upfield

Parent Company: KKR & CO. Inc.

Founded: 2018

Location: Amsterdam, Noord–Holland

Type(s) of Products: Plant–based Spreads

Website: https://upfield.com

Upton's Naturals

Founded: 2006

Location: Chicago, Illinois

Type(s) of Products: Seitan and Jackfruit, Real Meal Kits, Ch'eesy Macs and Jerky Bites

Website: https://www.uptonsnaturals.

Brands without an Instagram Page

Maika Foods

Founded: 2015

Location: Los Angeles, California

Type(s) of Products: Burgers, Hot–Dogs, Steak Alternatives

Website: https://maikafoods.com

Morning Star Farms

Parent Company: Kellogg

Founded: 1974

Location: Battle Creek, Michigan

Type(s) of Products: A variety of Frozen Meat Products

Website: https://www.morningstarfarms.com/en_US/home.html

Sweet Earth Natural Foods

Parent Company: Nestlé USA

Founded: 1978

Location: BMoss Landing, California

Type(s) of Products: Beef, Pork, Sausage, Chicken Alternatives

Website: https://www.goodnes.com/sweet-earth/

APPENDIX 2: SOME INSTAGRAM TIPS

Packaged vs Ready to eat

COMPANIES CHOOSE TO SHOW THE FOOD UNPACKAGED AND READY TO EAT, SOMETIMES ALSO WITH PACKAGED PRODUCT

'DELICIOUS'

Taste Claims

THERE WAS A CONSISTENT EMPHASIS ON THE TASTE OF PRODUCTS THROUGHOUT THE POSTS, WITH OVER HALF OF THE BRANDS EMPHASISING HOW TASTY THEIR PRODUCT IS IN THE CONTENT THEY POSTED

ALSO MENTIONS TASTE IN THE TAGS OF THE POST