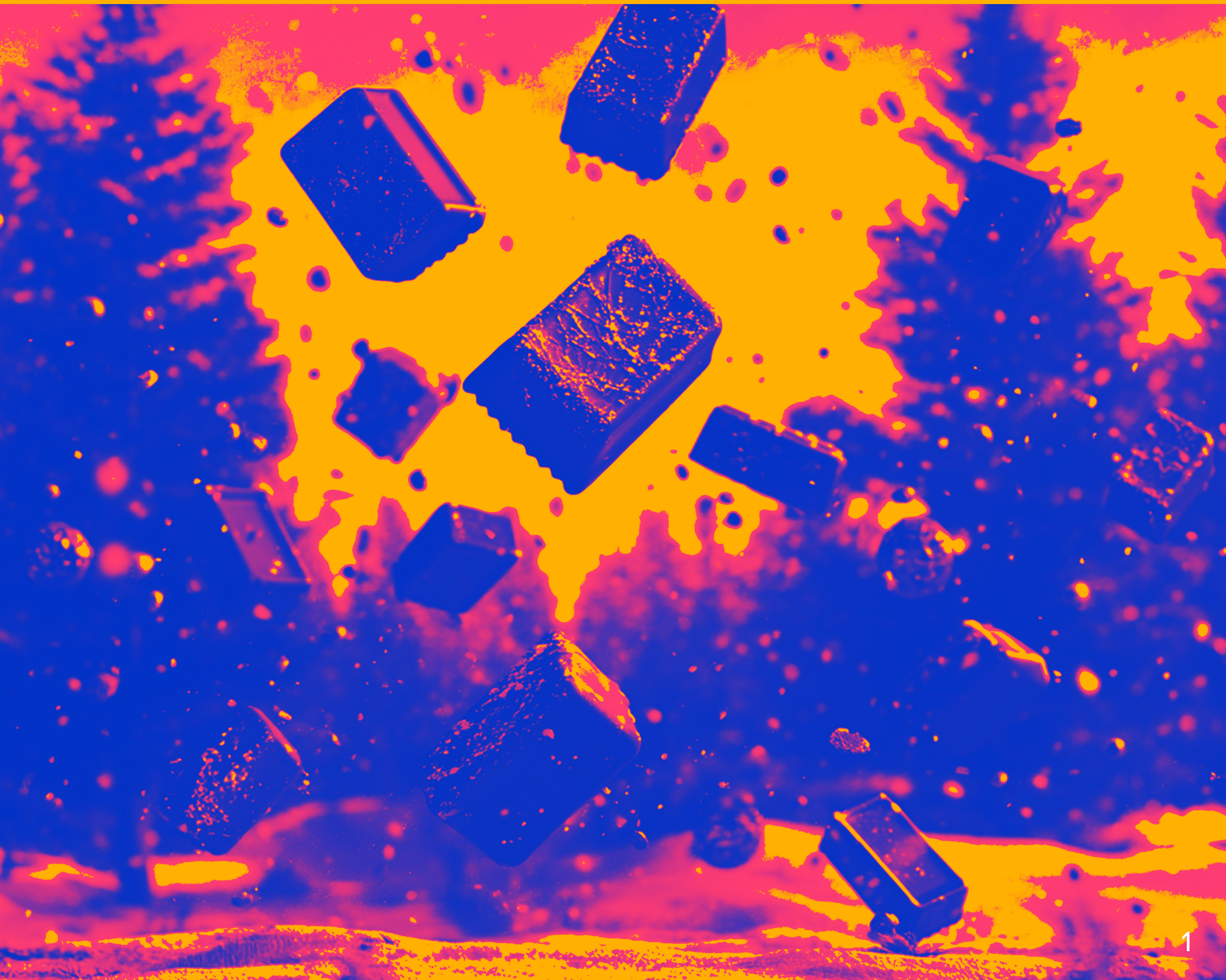


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# The ultimate guide to successful seasonal innovation



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# Introduction

Creating a new product or innovation is a challenging process in general, but what about seasonal innovation?

If done correctly, **seasonal innovation can play a crucial role** in helping a brand stay relevant and competitive. As consumer preferences evolve with the seasons, businesses must adapt to meet these changing demands. However, **the path to successful seasonal innovation is often littered with challenges**. It requires keen market insights, agile operations and creative thinking to launch products that resonate with the seasonal spirit.

Despite these hurdles, the rewards of seasonal innovation are significant. By leveraging seasonal trends, businesses can drive short-term trial, capturing the attention of consumers who are eager to try new and timely offerings. This approach not only **boosts sales during peak seasons** but also has the potential to **attract new consumers** and keeps your business top-of-mind year-round. When done right, seasonal innovation can also be highly incremental to your core range.

**In this guide, we'll break down the elements that make for a successful seasonal innovation as well as what to watch out for based on consumer research.**



# How we identify successful innovation

Before we dive in, here's a quick introduction on how we define success.

New products need to accomplish two key things:

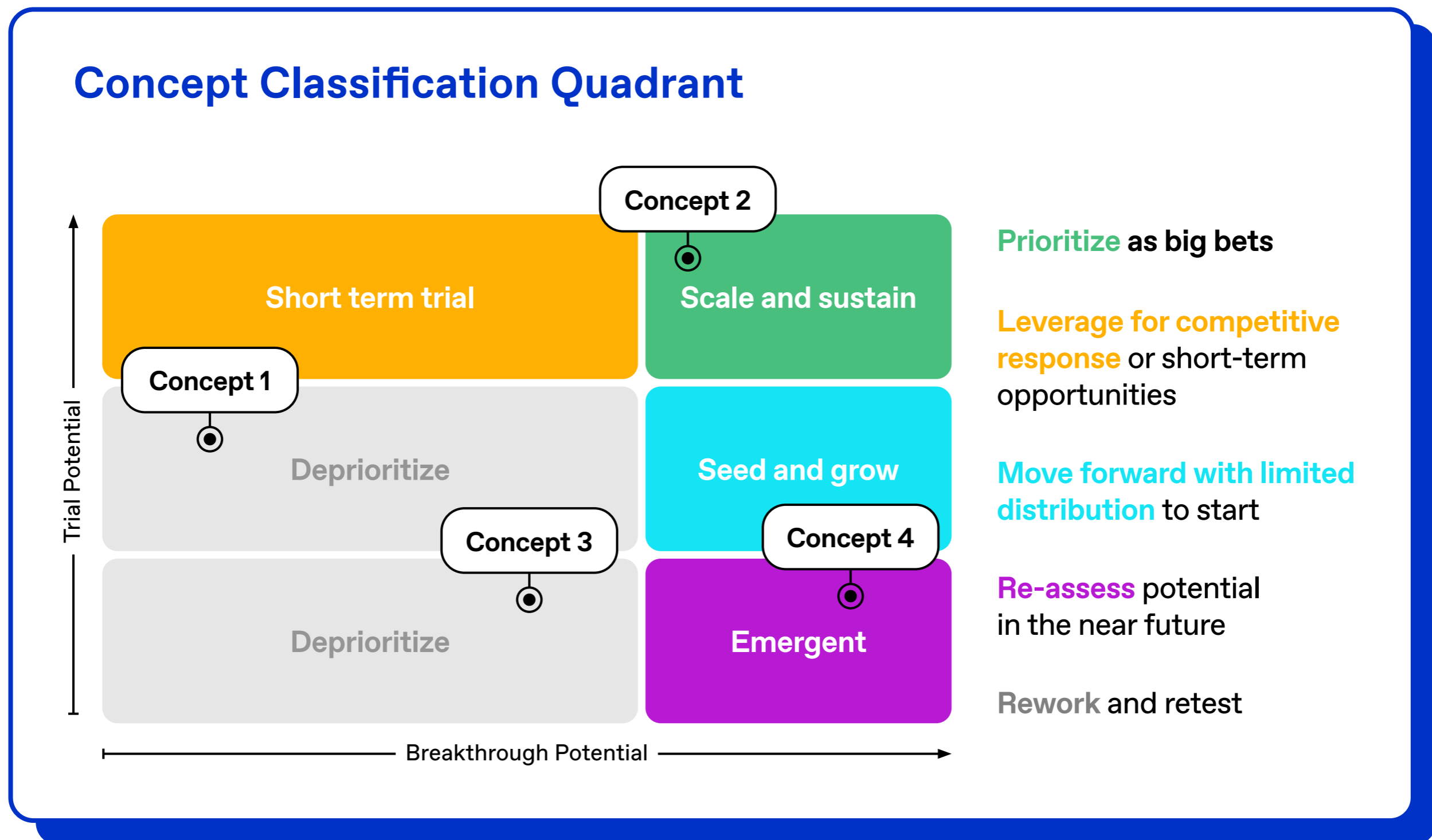
1. Entice consumers enough to want to try them
2. Stand out from the competition and disrupt consumers' purchase habits

Because limited-edition innovation isn't around for long, it needs to have maximum impact in that short time. Being different and having a level of advantage over others in the market is important, but **driving a decent level of trial should be the priority** for brands.



With that in mind, we focus on **two key metrics to determine success**: Trial Potential and Breakthrough Potential. While Trial Potential is based on the product's purchase likelihood, Breakthrough Potential is defined by how different and superior the product is perceived to be vs. what's already available in the market.

We plot these scores on a classification grid to forecast a product's performance in market and advise on the best launch strategy.



*Each concept is plotted on a matrix based on its Trial Potential and Breakthrough Potential. In this view, all concepts are classified as one of five types based on their performance, which gives clear guidance on how to evolve the concept and how to take it to market.*

**Now let's get into it.**

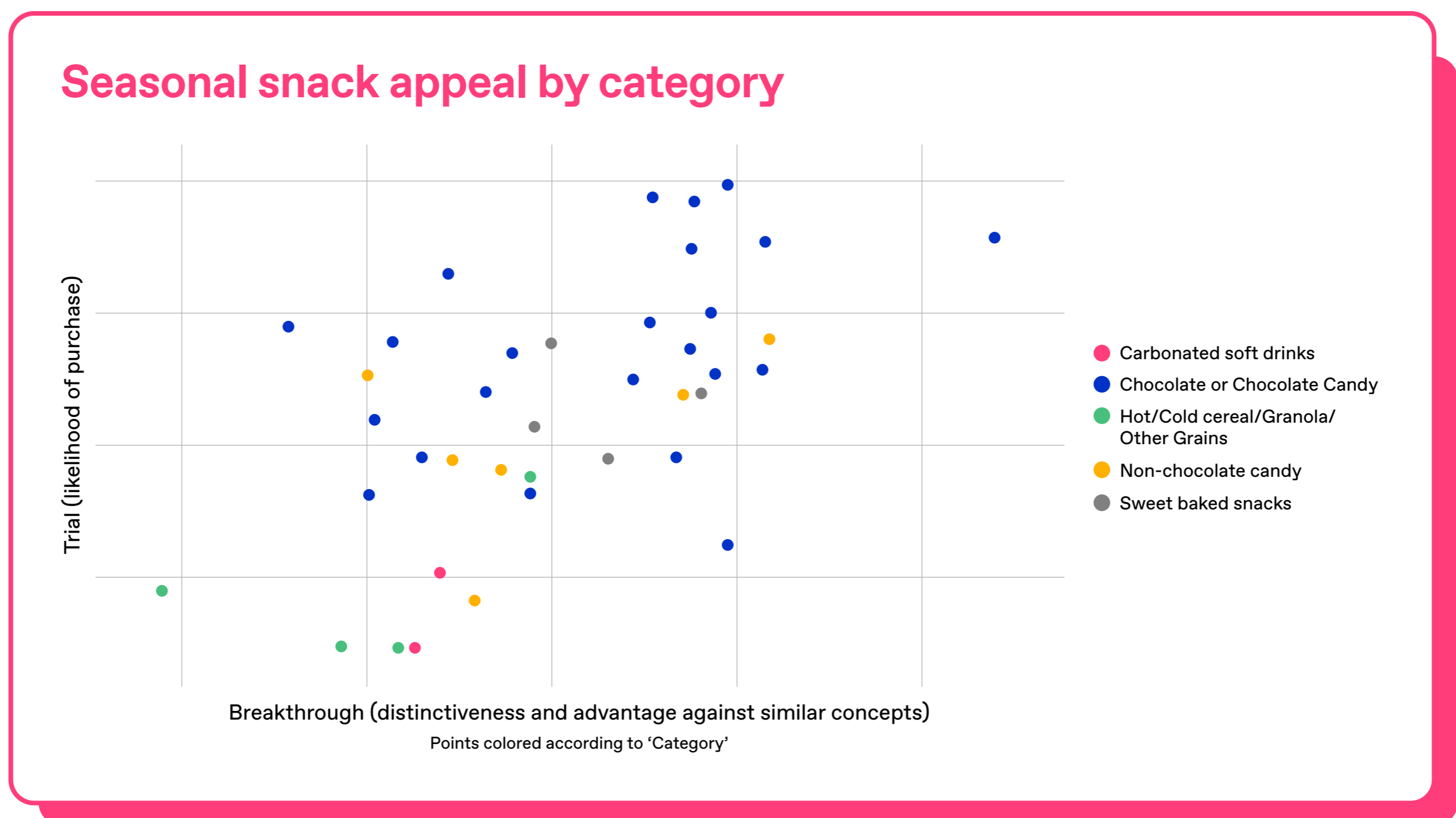


# Elements to embrace

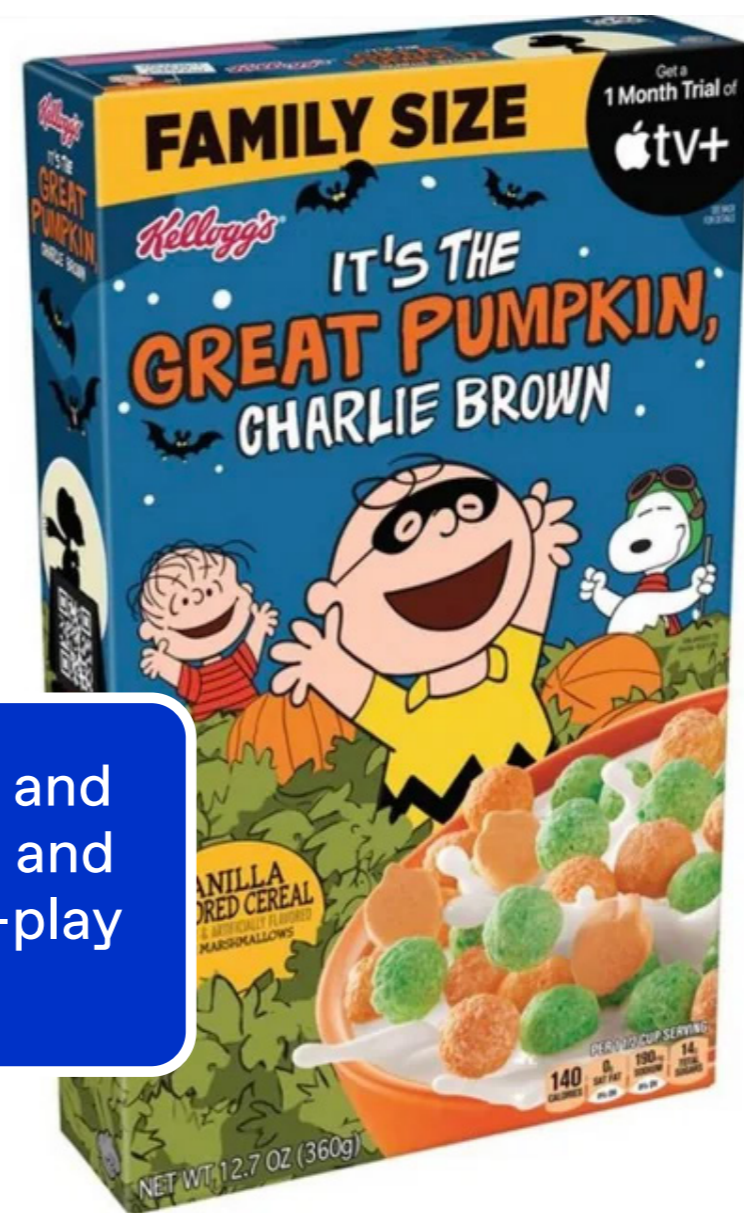
## 1. Ensuring your brand or category is relevant to the season

If it doesn't make sense for your brand to tie into a specific season, don't force it. Your brand should **maintain true category relevance for seasonal innovation to be effective.**

Some categories or brands have a greater connection to particular seasons. For example, we've seen that chocolate brands have an advantage when credibly launching a Halloween, Christmas or Easter product. But categories like cereals and soft drinks aren't easily viewed as a seasonal treat consumers enjoy.



In particular, we've seen that cereals don't land well at Halloween. Consumers are quick to judge the amount of sugar they assume is in the cereal.



Halloween is highly linked to candy and indulgence, so there are categories and brands that have a greater right-to-play during this season.

Forcing a seasonal product that doesn't align with your brand's core values or consumer expectations can dilute your brand identity and confuse customers.

So instead, **focus on leveraging the seasons or events that naturally fit with your brand and products**, ensuring that any seasonal offering feels authentic and relevant. By doing so, you maintain brand integrity and strengthen your connection with your audience.

#### CONSUMER RESEARCH TIP

**Make sure what you're creating actually makes sense coming from your brand. When running your research, ask consumers whether they'd purchase a product like this and whether they believe it fits with your brand and category. And look to the verbatims to see if there's any confusion.**

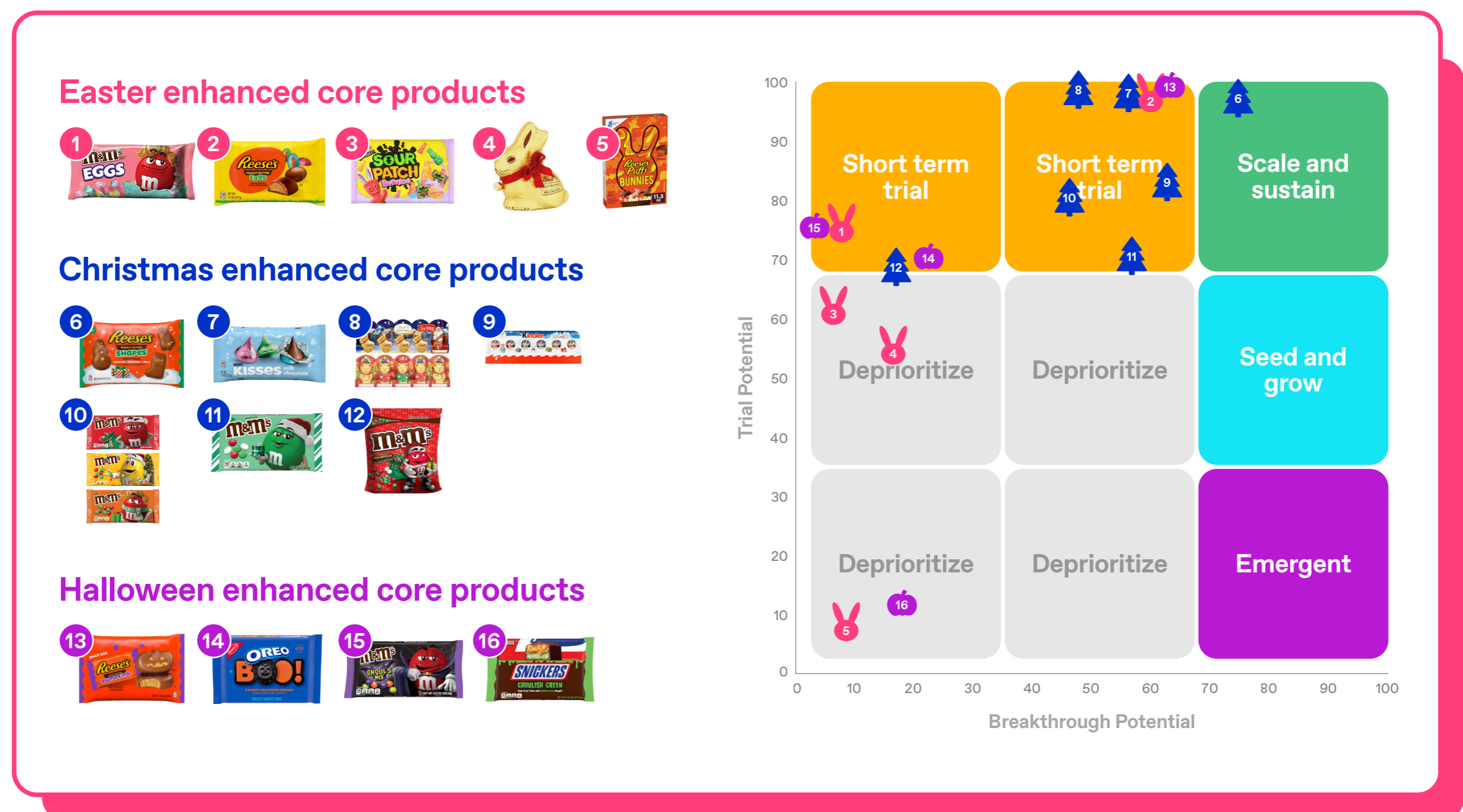
## 2. Making seasonally-relevant changes to core products

When it comes to seasonal innovation, less is more. Making minor changes to existing core products for seasonality is often the clear path to success.

This approach leverages the familiarity and popularity of your existing products while adding a fresh, timely twist that excites consumers. It also allows you to capitalize on established brand credentials and trust, **reducing the risks associated with launching entirely new products.**

Plus, small, seasonal adjustments can create a sense of novelty and urgency, encouraging trial and repeat purchases without straying from what your brand does best.

These enhanced core products tend to **perform well across seasons.** For example, Hershey's Kisses Santa Hats during Christmas, M&M's Peanut Butter Eggs during Easter and Reese's Peanut Butter Pumpkins during Halloween.





Consumers love when brands change the look of a product they already know by adding festive colors to the packaging that mirror the holiday season or change the shape of an existing hit product to correlate with the holiday.

### Same product, slightly different



This could be as simple as changing a chocolate treat to take the shape of a pumpkin during Halloween or using pastel colors during Easter.

One brand that does this well is Reese's, who consistently creates new product shapes for every season (including **a new medal shape for the 2024 Olympic games!**). These are always a hit with consumers, because it takes what people love about Reese's Cups and makes it appropriate for the season.



Most of Reese's seasonal or limited edition products we have researched sit within the "short term trial" areas of our potential quadrant, which is ideal for seasonal innovations. Only one manages to score a "scale and sustain" spot, likely because it's the only one that features a variety of seasonal shapes and therefore scores higher on breakthrough potential, being seen as more differentiated and advantageous.

### CONSUMER RESEARCH TIP

**When running your research, analyze the consumer feedback from your previous seasonal products to understand which elements are the most appealing and why. You can use these insights to inform your new seasonal product ideas and test them with consumers to get open-ended feedback.**

### 3. Aiming for broad consumer appeal

If you're creating a limited-time innovation for what you know is likely a narrow audience (like those who enjoy black licorice flavors) you might want to reconsider.

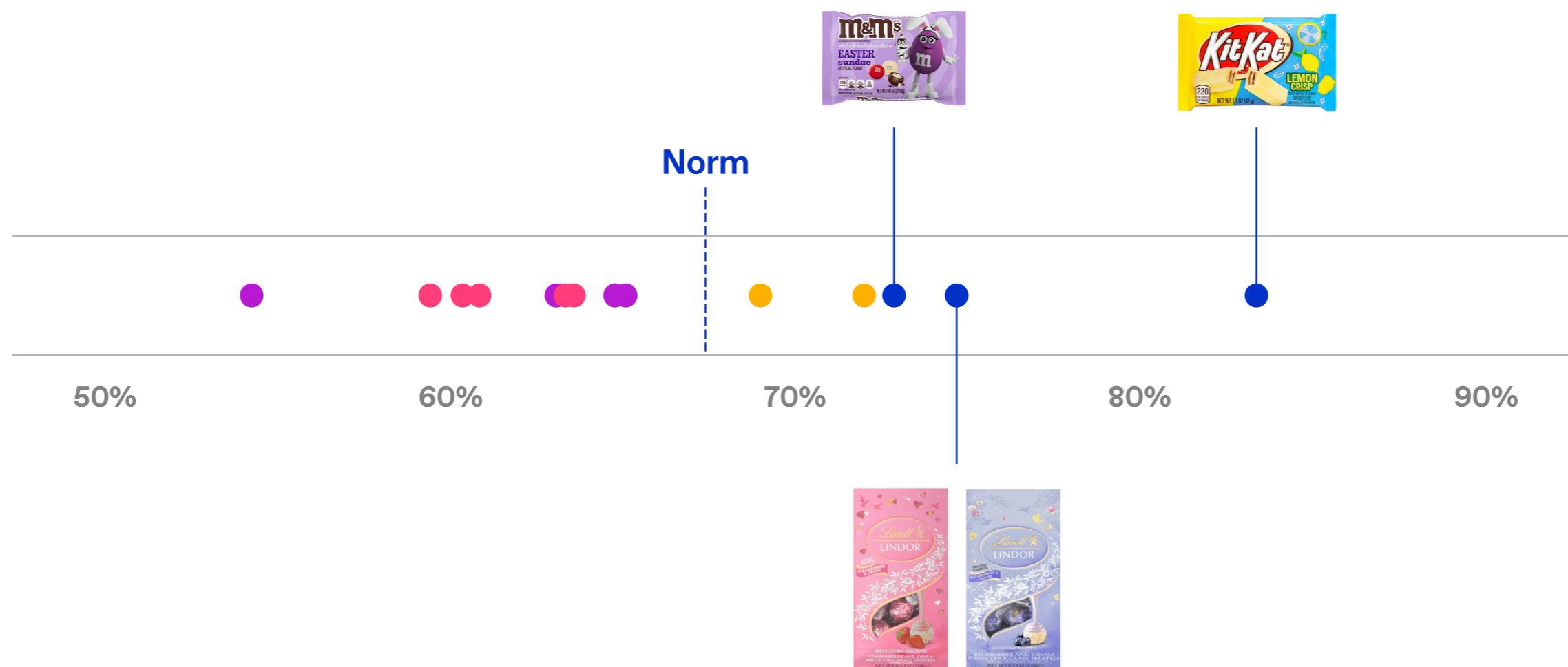
It's usually **best to appeal to a broad audience for seasonal innovation**. Since these products are typically only available for a limited time, you want to sell as much as possible to recoup your investment. And if it only appeals to a narrow audience, you're limiting your ability to do that.

**In order to maximize the effectiveness of your seasonal offerings, aim for products that can attract and engage a wide audience, ensuring greater visibility and a stronger return on investment.**



For example, for the Easter season, we looked at three products with new flavors that were also all seen as the most distinctive: M&M's Easter Sundae, KitKat Lemon Crisp and Lindt Easter Truffles.

## Distinctiveness (T2B)



Kit Kat's Lemon Crisp scored significantly lower in purchase likelihood — because lemon is not a universally loved flavor. **Testing with consumers can help you spot those concerns** before you launch your product.

By prioritizing consumer input, you build stronger connections with your consumers and enhance the overall effectiveness of your seasonal product strategy.

### CONSUMER RESEARCH TIP

**Is the majority of your target consumer reacting positively to your concept? We recommend testing your new product ideas with a broad category audience and then zoom in on the particular target groups. How well is your product resonating with the broad category audience? Which audiences does it resonate the most with? Is it only resonating with a niche audience? To ensure a greater chance for success, consider moving forward with the majority ruling.**

# Things to watch out for

## 1. Creating brand new products

Brand new products can generate excitement and work on some occasions, more often than not they **don't drive engagement from a wide enough range of consumers** — who inevitably compare them to the original products or flavors available all year round.

**We typically don't see brand new seasonal innovation land well with consumers. And doing so is also a massive investment for something that will only be around for a short period of time.**



As seen in the chart below, when we researched Halloween, Easter and Christmas innovations, all products we classified as being brand new or having a new flavor performed poorly on Trial and Breakthrough Potential, sitting in the lower third of all food (271 products) and beverages (159 products).



While consumers thought these new products seemed “ideal” they didn’t meet consumer expectations for food and drink products.

So while launching a brand new product could be done you should tread carefully.

### CONSUMER RESEARCH TIP

**If consumer needs aren’t fully explored when launching limited edition products, there’s a risk you’ll waste resources on developing and launching products that won’t deliver enough incremental sales, negatively impacting your return on investment.**

## 2. Seasonal changes that consumers find unappetizing

We'll dive deeper into flavor choices next, but there are other elements to **products that consumers may find unappetizing** that brands should watch out for when creating a seasonal variation.

For example, in the spirit of Halloween, Snickers introduced a green bar called "Snickers Ghoulish Green" that unfortunately missed the mark with consumers.



Snickers' choice of green was seen as distasteful — consumers knew the product would taste the same but **felt the color was off-putting**. They were also frustrated by the fact that the original Snickers branding and colors **detracted from the overall “ghoulish” feel** of the product.

So while green makes sense for halloween, and consumers are okay with other candy being green, it wasn't the right fit in a Snickers bar — just like KitKat's yellow Lemon Crisp bars.



#### CONSUMER RESEARCH TIP

**While some elements such as color choice can make sense for the season, it may not sit well with consumers. Color choice can actually impact taste perception, so if something is changed from one color to a more vibrant green, consumers might associate that with a particular taste, even if the product flavor stays the same as the original.**

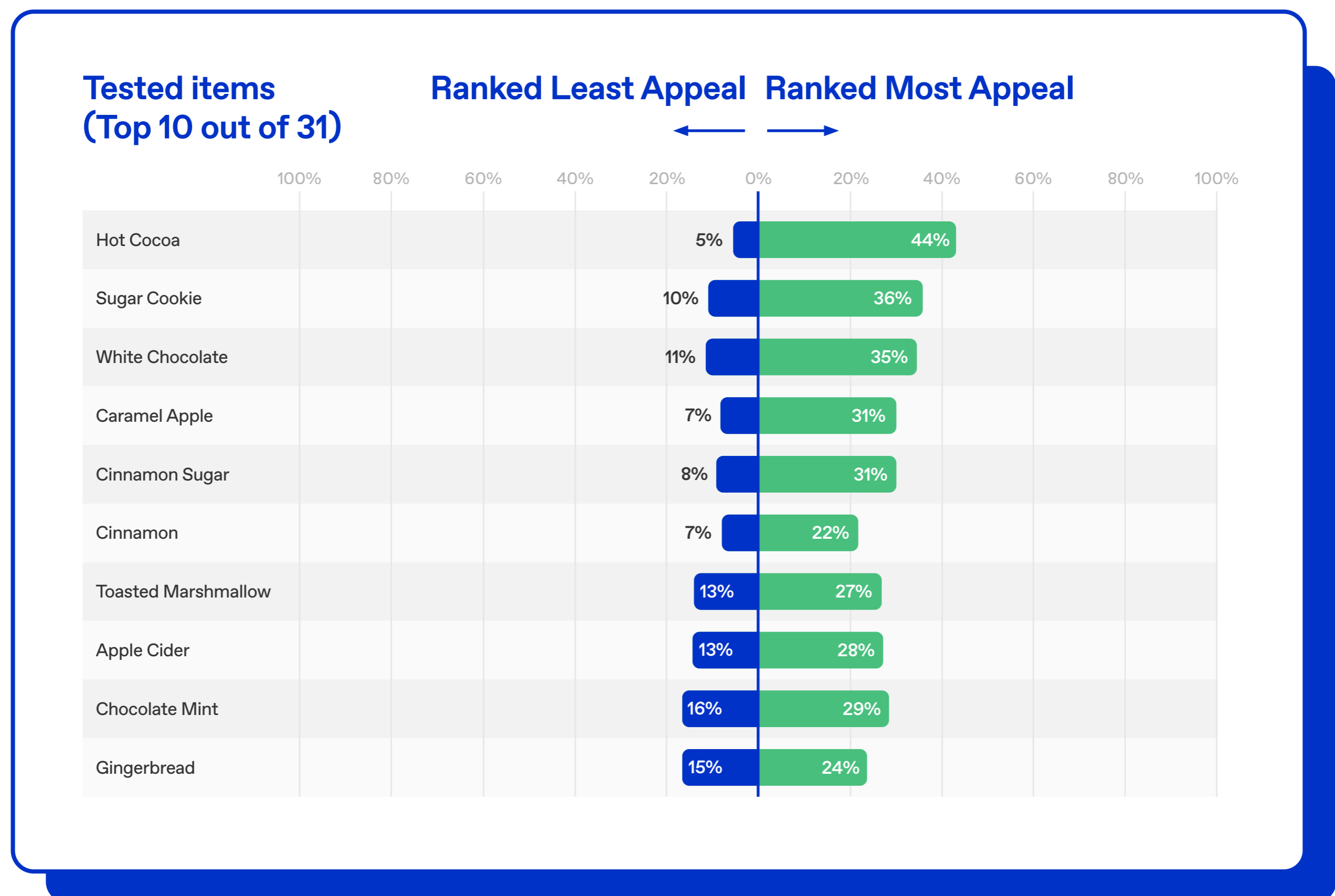
**So bear in mind that you have to be very clear about what the change to the product really means. And if you do end up making a change like this for seasonality, make sure to pay attention to what consumers are saying in their verbatims to get a better read on their reactions.**



### 3. Polarizing flavor choices unappetizing

Flavors can be a tricky thing. When looking at seasonal innovation, you have to find a flavor that consumers are willing to try, that fits with your product AND makes sense for the season.

To start, **not all flavors are created equal**. Some are universally loved while others are more polarizing. For example, hot cocoa is the most appealing winter/Christmas flavor, while a lot of people like gingerbread and a lot of people really don't like gingerbread.



This understanding of holiday flavors explains why **Hershey's Kisses Hot Cocoa** was one of the most successful winter innovations we've seen.



But even **universally loved flavors** (like hot cocoa) **don't necessarily work across all brands and categories**. Some consumers didn't feel that the flavor fit with the OREO brand, which might explain why it was less successful.



**CONSUMER 1**  
**“I’m not sure if the combo of flavors fits with Oreo”**



It's also worth noting that understanding which flavors consumers love can help you name and package your product appropriately. We found that "sugar cookie" is the second most appealing winter flavor.



It can still be worth creating a product with a polarizing flavor, because there are some consumers who love that flavor. Just keep in mind that while appealing to a narrow audience in the long-run can generate a consistent and returning customer base, it can be limiting for seasonal products.

#### CONSUMER RESEARCH TIP

This is why it's so critical to ensure you include flavors in your consumer research — because that one aspect can have a major effect on its success.

# Seasonal differences

Here's a brief overview of our overall takeaways on what works best for each season.

## Halloween & Christmas

When it comes to both Halloween and Christmas products, it's best to focus on creating **variations of existing hit products in different shapes or colors.**

During the Halloween season, if you're in the **candy and confections industry, this is a major opportunity** for your brand to shine; while other categories should be much more mindful about their right to play.

It's also worth calling out that Christmas was noted as the strongest season to innovate for, as people are willing to go bigger for the holiday more than for other seasons and the window for promotion is longer.

## Easter

It's **chocolate that reigns supreme** for the Easter season, which can make it hard for non-chocolate products to associate with the season.

But a lot of opportunity also lies in flavor options. Unlike other holidays and seasons, Easter doesn't have a defined portfolio of characteristic flavors, which offers a **huge opportunity for brands to establish Easter flavors** that consumers can associate with the holiday year upon year.

## Summer

Summer is a season not dominated by candy or sweet treats, so it's a **great time for beverage brands to shine.**

Consumers often see bright colors as summery, and seasonal flavor variations like watermelon, peach and lime can be quite popular with consumers looking for a **refreshing twist on their favorite products** during the summer. So if your brand or category sees a natural and authentic opportunity here, it's probably worth exploring.

There's also an opportunity to tie your brand to the 4th of July in the US, with fireworks imagery and red, white and blue colors, or any sporting events that are happening this time of year such as the **Summer Olympics** or World Cup.

# Final thoughts

Embracing seasonal innovation is a powerful strategy for driving short-term sales.

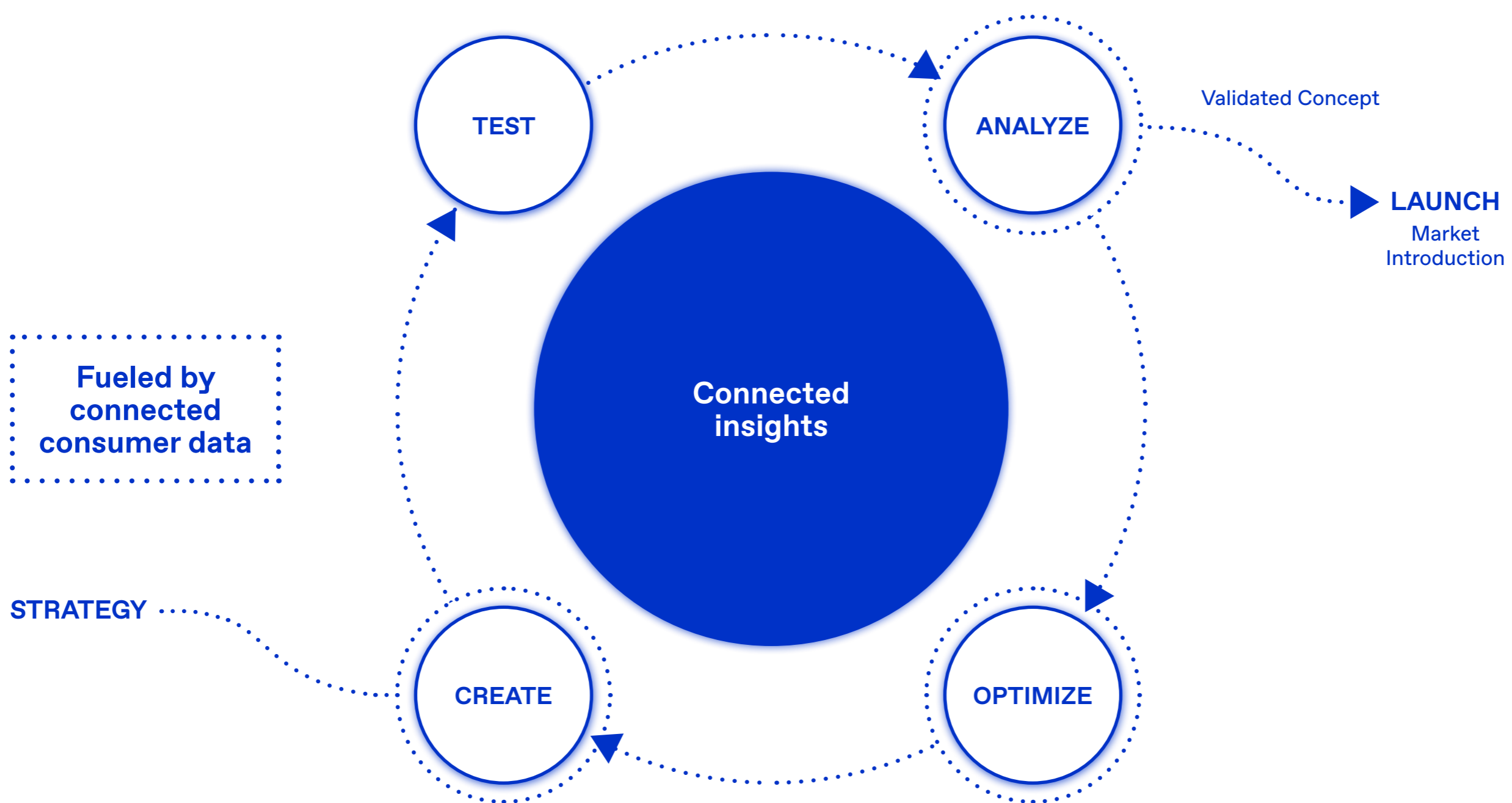
To maximize its potential, get feedback from consumers to ensure offerings align with their desires, make sure what you're creating fits your brand and consider making minor changes to core products for a fresh twist — remembering that less is more. But be cautious of polarizing flavors or niche products that might alienate a wider audience.

By making sure your new product introductions are relevant for both your consumers and your brand, you can drive trial and brand penetration.



# Connected innovation insights produce better innovation

Zappi empowers teams to move away from linear, late-stage validation to a continuous, connected and iterative innovation process that drives better results by allowing insights teams to gather feedback continuously and optimize based on consumer input throughout the product life cycle.



## With Zappi's continuous and connected insights platform, you get:

- **Fast results:** Gather consumer insights in hours, make faster decisions and enable better insights accessibility in your organization.
- **Iterative development:** Iterate and refine concepts throughout your product development process to help you produce better innovation.
- **AI-powered:** Supercharge the innovation process to accelerate innovation and reduce internal roadblocks with AI-generated and optimized concepts, AI quick reports and more.
- **Connected learning:** Learn from past data and apply lessons from one project to another for continuous improvement and learning with a suite of tools that help you flow seamlessly from idea screening to element testing and concept development.
- **Tailored norms:** Access rigorous methods with transparent and customized norms, ensuring the insights you get are highly relevant and actionable.

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