

‘FOOD INDUSTRY INVESTS TOO LITTLE IN HEALTHY PRODUCTS’

When developing new products, food companies should not have such high requirements for commercial aspects such as the taste and price so as to allow more room for societal values such as health and sustainability, argues PhD candidate Jilde Garst.

‘Companies do not always find it easy to innovate and create healthier products,’ explains Garst, from Business Management & Organization, who obtained her doctorate on 5 February. Firstly, this is because health does not always go well with other important product characteristics such as the taste and the price. There is also disagreement on what counts as healthy, while new research results can lead to shifts in the definition of healthiness.

Garst discovered that companies that are consistent in their definition of healthy are more successful in developing healthy products. Moreover, companies that ask

NGOs and consumers for feedback on their product development end up developing more healthy products. Feedback from commercial players such as suppliers has no effect. ‘One possible explanation is that there is often already a consen-

Price and taste play a bigger role in consumers’ purchasing decisions than health and sustainability

sus in the food industry about what is healthy, so you don’t get much critical reflection, whereas feedback from society at large leads to new insights.’

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Garst argues that companies should not just aim for profit but also try to make a positive contribu-



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tion to society. A difficult choice for businesspeople. ‘If a company makes a product with less sugar, there is a risk that consumers will switch to its competitor.’ Labels such as Vinkje and Nutri-Score were set up to avoid this and create a level playing field. But Garst says this does not necessarily give companies an incentive to in-

novate. A label increases the visibility of healthy products but the adverse health consequences of unhealthy products remain invisible. Garst: ‘You could give more insight into companies’ performance by ranking them, for example based on the percentage of healthy products in a company.’ **TL**