Future of Food



Can a productionfirst nation learn to think like its

customers?

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As opportunities open, New Zealand faces a test.

Can a production-first nation learn to think like its customers?



New Zealand's next phase of growth will depend on pairing quality with curiosity, but are we ready?

Our production mindset has long focused on scale, but success now depends on how well we understand our consumers. IKEA's painstaking study of Kiwi homes before opening here showed what empathy in action looks like: listening before selling, designing before assuming. As India's vast, complex market edges within reach through a free trade deal, the burning question is whether New Zealand can make that same shift, or whether we'll cling to old habits and discover, too late, that the world has moved on.

Opportunity: New Zealand can evolve its global competitiveness by shifting from a product-led to a people-led strategy; one grounded in empathy, collaboration, and realtime market intelligence. By using technology to better understand and connect with consumers, forging stronger insight-sharing networks across the sector, and reframing the national story around both quality and cultural understanding, New Zealand can position itself as a trusted, emotionally resonant brand in fast-changing markets like India and beyond.

Threat: New Zealand's food and fibre sector risks strategic stagnation: falling behind because its identity, systems, and investments are not evolving fast enough to match changing global markets.

Over-reliance on the "clean, green" story, production-centric thinking, fragmented intelligence, and underinvestment in consumer insight all point to the same core issue: an industry too inward-looking to keep pace with shifting global tastes, technologies, and values.

Key points:



Empathy as a competitive edge.

Global success now depends on understanding consumers' daily realities, not just selling quality products.



New Zealand's traditional mindset.

The country's export model leans on provenance and efficiency, assuming that we will be able to sell what we make.



Evidence of the shift. Companies like IKEA demonstrate what empathy looks like in practice, investing early in deep cultural research to understand new consumers.



India as a defining test. A trade agreement with India will offer a huge opportunity to our sector but only if it can adapt its production-first habits to a complex, multi-layered market that rewards cultural intelligence.



Structural gaps. Limited funding, fragmented insights, and uneven capability mean smaller exporters can struggle to build the consumer understanding needed for global success.



Path forward. Embedding empathy through research, collaboration, and adaptive strategy creates an opportunity to remain credible and competitive in the global marketplace.

"Without empathy, you risk misunderstanding an entire market."

The 5:30am lesson¹

At 5:30am in Tokyo, 27-year-old Moe begins her day. She starts the daily laundry load, taking care not to wake her sleeping husband, Motoki, and their baby, Sutan.

She brushes her teeth and dusts her face with makeup, then prepares her husband's bento box with grilled Tamagoyaki, fish, steamed rice and vegetables. She prepares porridge with natto, broccoli and bonito flakes for Sutan.

At 7am, Motoki and Sutan wake. Moe changes Sutan's nappy and feeds her while Motoki leaves for a run.

Moe's morning routine was shared by Niamh Patterson, Sensory and Consumer Insights Specialist at FORWARD Insight, at The E Tipu Summit in Palmerston North², New Zealand in May 2025. Niamh asked the audience what gift they would give Moe, more than half, only slightly tongue-in-cheek, responded: "A new husband."

Through their cultural lens, Moe's routine looks like domestic overload. But for her, it's rooted in care, identity, and pride.

The lesson? To understand Moe, you need empathy for different lives and different cultures. Without empathy, you risk misunderstanding an entire market.

And that's a lesson that reaches far beyond Japan. It raises serious questions for producers around the world, including here at home.

Old story, new markets

Food and product development in New Zealand has traditionally followed the rhythm of what can be grown or manufactured locally. The export base was built on commodity sectors such as dairy, meat, and horticulture, designed for efficient scale and then sold offshore.

For decades, provenance has been the core of our story: clean landscapes, grass-fed animals, innovation and - of course - Lord of the Rings. The relaxed beat of this story, together with our "give it a go" mentality, has carried us a long way. But it has also bred a kind of confidence, maybe even complacency.

Why?

The world has moved on at breathtaking speed. Food innovation crosses borders in real time, and New Zealand's consumers are scattered across every continent. The landscape has changed. Success is no longer how well we produce, but by how deeply we understand the people we serve: what they value, how they cook, and what they truly crave, before deciding what to create for them.

Globally, leading companies are turning to empathy as their way in.

It's fair to ask if New Zealand has kept up. Are we still approaching production with a meat-and-three-veg mindset when the world has shifted to a palate defined by understanding, insight, and adaptation?

We saw the signs

Empathy might sound like a soft skill. But many now argue it's a vital strategic tool; one that shapes how products, services, and ideas travel beyond their home turf. Without it, businesses risk entering new territories armed with assumptions from their own backyard, not the lives of the consumers they hope to win.

The rise of technology and Al insights has supercharged consumer-first thinking. But the idea isn't new; the signals have been there for years.

Twenty-five years ago, The Warehouse entered the Australian market, assuming shoppers across the Tasman

"But doing it right isn't easy."

behaved much like Kiwis. After five years, and at a cost of \$100 million³, it exited, conceding it had misread the environment. The big-box model that worked at home didn't fit Australia's mall-based retail culture.

Around the same time, Starbucks arrived in New Zealand with its sweet, American-style drinks. It failed to get a foothold⁴, due to the distinct Kiwi coffee culture and preferences for neighbourhood cafés. It was a lesson in cultural nuance. Today, Starbucks has adapted, catering mainly to tourists and students.

Fast-forward to 2025 and the contrast is stark. Before opening in New Zealand, IKEA sent researchers into 500 homes⁵ to understand how Kiwis live, decorate, and dream. Months before launch, the company published a 26-page report capturing what it had learned.

This was more than market research; it was empathy in action. IKEA's investment in understanding New Zealanders stands as a best-in-class example of how empathy underpins successful market entry. It shows what can happen when a global brand listens deeply before it sells.

Edelman, in its 2025 <u>Trust Barometer Special report</u>, calls this the "Me Era", with its research showing 64 percent of people say they choose brands based on their beliefs and 68 percent say it's very or extremely important that brands make them feel good.

For New Zealand producers looking outward, this is a lesson worth heeding, and one which is becoming urgent.

As New Zealand's free trade agreement with India⁶ moves ahead, we're poised to access a vast new market, with one of the most complex and diverse consumer populations in the world. Have we learned enough from examples like IKEAs, or are we at risk of repeating old mistakes in a new market?

Shifting the tanker

Entering a new market is always difficult, let alone one which has 1.4 billion people⁷, 22 languages, hundreds of dialects, multiple faiths and numerous cultural, geographical and socio-economic nuances.

India, with its high tariffs and complex business environment, is a market few New Zealand companies have successfully cracked⁸ - Quality New Zealand⁹, with its international cricketing links, being a notable example. More on that later.

For more than 25 years, Louise Beard, Director at FORWARD Insight, has been at the forefront of forging connections with consumers in new markets.

Beard says entering new markets without deep consumer understanding is like 'flying blind'; a risk that can cost millions, if not billions. Hamish Renton, CEO of UK-based HRA Global agrees, arguing New Zealand's broad-brush approach, long focused on scale and provenance, too often ignores the proof points consumers now demand.

But doing it right isn't easy. "It's like shifting a tanker," Beard says. "The ones that are becoming more marketcentric are driving huge results, but some of our foodproducing categories are not there yet."

Renton describes New Zealand as retaining a "bulk-exporter mentality ... very effective in some cases, but in others it is a million miles wide but not very deep. It's like, 'Here it is, here's our stuff, who wants it?' It's an old-school approach, rather than focusing on developing for shopper or processor needs in international markets." That mindset, he adds, is "like taking a tank to a gunfight - too big, too bulky, too slow," when what's needed is "a more agile, tailored approach."

"It's a challenge that should ring loudly for New Zealand producers."

Beard's colleague Carlo Magni says New Zealand is still learning. "We haven't always done it well," he says. "We're still on the journey."

But the world isn't waiting. "The rate of change is so fast that no one's prepared," Magni warns. "The only thing you can do realistically is double or triple the speed of learning."

It's a challenge that should ring loudly for New Zealand producers.

Do we have a problem?

Meeting the challenge is far from simple. The ambition to move faster and with greater empathy often collides with the limits of money, capability, and coordination.

Magni says smaller and mid-sized exporters often lack the funding to do proper market work overseas, while bigger players can afford the kind of deep research that builds genuine empathy.

Fragmentation adds another layer. While organisations like NZTE are hugely helpful to many exporters, Beard says New Zealand needs a more powerful platform for aligned insights, particularly given the value in information the big players have gathered. Without this, smaller producers are left to reinvent the wheel.

And many New Zealand producers still assume our quality and provenance story is the easy sell. But as Renton notes, countries that once lagged, including Chile, Norway and Canada, are overtaking us by investing in their terroir story, alongside detailed consumer insight.

The result is uneven progress, says Beard. She sees a few operating "at the best level in the world", while others drag behind.

Breaking down the barriers

Beard outlines two broad paths for companies wanting to get closer to their consumers.

The first is a light-touch, contextual approach, effectively what can be described as market "pulse-checking." This can include online audits and in-store observations. It's faster, more affordable, and keeps exporters connected to market reality.

Today's tech tools make this easier than ever: social media, analytics, and AI platforms can reveal what consumers crave or how they behave. Even something as simple as running a TikTok channel to test how people respond to a lesson on cooking New Zealand lamb can be an exercise in understanding your customers.

The second is a deep-dive, strategic approach that includes ethnographic visits, photo diaries, in-depth interviews, designed to understand daily life and context. It's more intensive, but it captures the kind of insight that turns empathy into a competitive advantage.

Some New Zealand companies are already proving what empathy in action looks like. Major players like Zespri, T&G, and Silver Fern Farms lead the pack, investing in the deep-dive approach to empathy. But there are others, smaller and more niche producers, who are tailoring their products with a consumer-first approach.

BerryCo: Bringing premium berries to South-East Asia

BerryCo, which sells into Southeast Asia, began its research by defining what 'premium' products meant to its consumers.

According to General Manager Alice Moore, "One of the key insights was around the size of the berries. "If you have mixed sizing in punnets, that lowers the premium appeal, it looks like less care has been taken. Consistency signals quality, and consumers are willing to pay more for that."

Health and wellness emerged as another driver, alongside status and aspiration. "Consumers want the latest quality products; they want to know they're eating the best," Moore says. "There's almost a fear of missing out; they want to be seen consuming those products."

The brand name was also tested extensively with consumers. The name 'Royal' helped build the high-end approach of the brand.

Moore sees too many producers continue to think "it's about them and the brand. But it's important that your values resonate with the consumer. You don't build your brand around your own values; you build it around what resonates with them."

Her conclusion is pragmatic: "We've been very good at mass producing things and sending them off. But we need to build demand first and keep that demand ahead of supply."

Woolworths NZ: Feeding every Kiwi

Closer to home, evolving consumer behaviour is reshaping how Woolworths NZ serves three million customers a week across its 185 supermarkets.

According to General Manager of Own Brand Andre Visser, "Everything we do is customer-first. We start with understanding: what is their need, and what is their want? Then we build that into product development so we can deliver to those needs and sometimes even inspire customers before they know what they want."

For Woolworths NZ, empathy means recognising context: parents needing quick, healthy lunchbox fillers; students on tight budgets; families managing dietary

restrictions. "Empathy is not a nice-to-have," Visser says. "It's essential."

The company combines loyalty data, targeted research, and its 'bunch' - a members-only community dedicated to tasting, testing and talking all things food - to inform its Own Brand ranging decisions

Empathy, for Woolworths NZ, also reaches beyond 'need' and stretches into meaning: food as memory, culture, and celebration. "Every Own Brand product we've launched in the past year connects back to a specific customer set and need," Visser adds.

IKEA: Understanding Kiwi homes

If empathy is about seeing life through the consumer's eyes, IKEA's arrival in New Zealand is a case study in commitment. The Swedish retailer, which opens its first store here on 4 December, invested in understanding how Kiwis live long before the first flat-pack arrived.

As part of its Life at Home Report NZ 2024, IKEA researchers spent thousands of hours inside more than 500 homes, from compact city apartments to sprawling rural properties. The aim was to see how New Zealanders actually live, including how they use space, where frustrations arise, and what makes their homes feel like their own.

Kiwi homes, the study found, are highly multifunctional. Garages, carpeted in 93% of homes, are not just for storage; they're gyms, laundries, offices and party zones.

Entryways, often cluttered with shoes and jackets thanks to wet weather and our habit of leaving footwear at the door, were identified as "high-friction spaces." Nearly 90% of respondents said they needed more storage there.

Kitchens, too, told a story: New Zealanders cook more than they order out, but almost half experience daily frustration with crowded pantries and overflowing fridges.

An IKEA spokesperson says the company's approach is rooted in empathy: "We've learned that entering a new market isn't about replicating a model, it's about co-creating something meaningful with the people who live there.

"It's not just about what people buy - it's about what they value, how they live, and what they aspire to."

"You need to step into real homes, listen to real stories, and understand the emotional and cultural landscape of everyday life. It's not just about what people buy - it's about what they value, how they live, and what they aspire to."

That philosophy has shaped everything from the product range to the store layout at Sylvia Park. The new store will showcase locally relevant solutions such as modular kitchens with hidden storage, entryway systems to reduce clutter, and garage organisation tools for multipurpose living. Sustainable features, including compost bins and planter kits, reflect New Zealanders' growing environmental priorities.

Globally, IKEA has been honing this practice for more than a decade. Each year, its *Life at Home* series captures insights from over 250,000 people in 40 countries.

"We've shifted from asking "What do people buy?" to "What do people need to feel safe, inspired, and themselves at home?"

This transformation has been driven by technology, generational change, and a growing demand for transparency, authenticity, and social responsibility.

Al now extends that empathy digitally. Tools such as *IKEA Kreativ* allow customers to visualise furniture in their own homes, while Al-driven demand sensing helps the company forecast needs and tailor communication.

The spokesperson notes the Life and Home Report is "not simply as a research initiative, but as a way of listening deeply to people around the world.

"This work allows us to go beyond assumptions and truly understand the everyday challenges, joys, and aspirations people face.

"It helps us learn how we can enable meaningful change, whether that's through smarter storage, more inclusive design, or sustainable solutions that reflect real lives."

QNZ: Talking cricket in India

If IKEA can spend months in Kiwi garages and kitchens before selling a single bookshelf, the same principle applies in reverse. And a true test of our ability to do this is unfolding right now.

Assuming we land a free trade deal, entering India will demand the same level of curiosity and respect. Success for producers entering the market will hinge on whether they can design products and propositions that connect with Indian consumers themselves.

Few people understand that better than former Black Cap Geoff Allott. More than a decade ago, while touring India, he noticed something missing: a lack of quality Kiwi food. With the backing of fellow cricketers Brendon McCullum, Daniel Vettori, Stephen Fleming and patron Sir Richard Hadlee, he co-founded Quality New Zealand, importing lamb, seafood and dairy for the Indian market.

Cricket gave them an opening. "Everyone from the tuk-tuk drivers to the chairs of the biggest companies in India wants to talk cricket," Allott says. The sport's shared history gave the team instant credibility, access that would otherwise have taken years to earn.

But cricket chat was only the start. India's consumers are anything but uniform. "You have urban metro centres, small towns, rural areas," Allott says. "Each has different price sensitivity and culture.

"It's about recognising that a middle-class professor in Mumbai might value convenience and status, while a consumer in rural India would value affordability and reliability. Geography, language and religion all play a part in purchasing behaviour, so messaging becomes important."

He also points to India's youthful demographic - 65 percent of the population is under 35 - and its mix of tradition and modern aspiration¹⁰. "They maintain cultural traditions, but they're highly motivated to adopt contemporary habits, are active on social media and aware of global trends," Allott says. "Family, community, and social validation remain central."

Empathy, in other words, isn't optional. "Coming back to our cricketers, it's not just about the game, it's about respect for the people and the country," Allott says. "That's what Indian consumers remember: the validation of who they are and how they have contributed. Indians don't like transactional sales or companies that don't add benefits to India."

Quality New Zealand's strategy reflected that understanding. The company localised products, adjusted pack sizes, and tailored messaging across languages and regions. It invested in a manufacturing hub to support distribution to 48 cities, maintaining control over quality and food safety while creating local jobs. That commitment has paid off: its products now feature in 92 percent of India's five-star hotels.

It has not been cheap. "Over the years, that has cost millions in tariffs," Allott says. "A trade deal would be massive."

He is optimistic, noting the goodwill between the countries, from fighting together at Gallipoli to Sir Edmund Hillary's role as High Commissioner and the enduring presence of New Zealand cricketers in the Indian Premier League. "We don't have animosity; we are respected, and our provenance story is fantastic. But we need to take time in the market to develop the relationships."

But he also sees stagnation. "I fear that our understanding of India is still not there at board level.

Directors operate on a 12-month KPI target. But India is not a 12-month KPI market. We have a lot of education to do, invest in the relationships to reap the benefits that India can offer."

His advice for others eyeing India is pointed: "Do they really understand India? Have they been here since they watched *Slumdog Millionaire* years ago? They need to come back to see the wealth that has been created, and the opportunities that are here."

A shape-shifting world

The companies investing in empathy, understanding, insights - whether in berries, supermarkets, meat or furniture - aren't just being kind; they're trying to stay alive in a world that changes faster than most can plan for.

Beard from FORWARD Insights says the organisations that get it right embed that thinking through every layer of governance and product design. Many still don't.

Markets are mutating faster than strategy cycles. South Korea, for instance, shows how a single social shift in women's rising workforce participation and shrinking households can flip product demand in under a decade. Those who didn't see it coming are now scrambling to redesign pack sizes and messaging.

Technology has made the consumer less predictable and more powerful. Retail platforms let shoppers customise everything from flavour to ethics and expect instant fulfilment. All now stitches these preferences into live data loops, promising precision and eroding patience. Consumers expect brands to know them already.

Beard sketches what's next: "Consumers will increasingly say, 'I want this type of food. These are my criteria. This is what's important to me. These are the kinds of meals I want. Find me some recipes. Send me the shop for the food."

It's a future that doesn't allow for inertia.

"That means showing up, learning fast, and proving value beyond sentiment."

New Zealand's Place in the Sun

New Zealand's food exporters like to talk about opportunity. But opportunity without effective execution is nothing.

A deal with India could open doors, but it won't guarantee anyone walks through them. Geography once gave us an advantage; now proximity to Asia means competing in its backyard.

Carlo Magni from FORWARD Insights warns against the idea that technology will fully bridge the empathy gap. "Al can collect patterns," he says, "but it can't stand in a shop and see what makes someone hesitate before they buy." And New Zealand won't lead the tech race anyway: "We don't have the budgets to be leaders in driving the future."

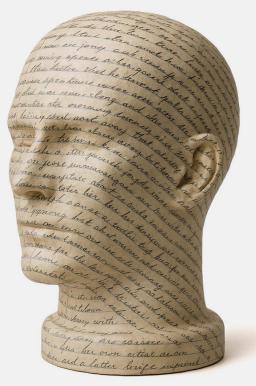
So, what do we have? Or what can we do?

According to Louise Beard at FORWARD Insights there are three tools we can adopt:

- Prioritise market insight and empathy understanding what our customers and consumers care about to ensure we win in our markets.
- 2. Have a market insights empathy investment planbuilding knowledge, making good decisions, and delivering sustainable value back to stakeholders.
- Embed market demand driven focus at all levels ensuring we deliver what the world wants better, faster, more efficiently and future proofed.

New Zealand's real edge will come from using these tools to amplify what can't be replicated: provenance, trust, and a human reading of the market. That means showing up, learning fast, and proving value beyond sentiment.

Those who keep mistaking nostalgia for strategy will fade quietly; those who match empathy with evidence will earn their place in the sun.



Interview Preparation

Why prepare for an interview

Time with users is precious, we need to make the most of it! While we always must allow room for the spontaneous, blissful serendipity of a userguided conversation, we should never abdicate our responsibility to prepare for interviews. Especially in following up with users (after testing etc.), it is imperative to plan your interviews. You may not get every question you prepare for, but you should come in with a plan for engagement.

How to prepare for an interview

Brainstorm questions

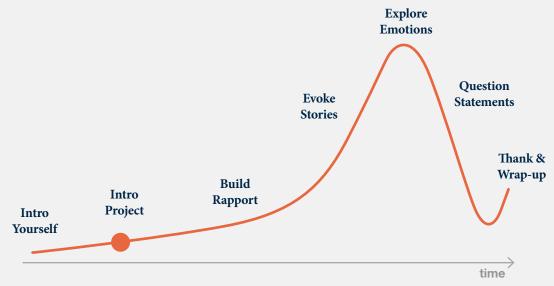
Write down all the potential questions your team can generate. Try to build on one another's ideas in order to flesh out meaningful subject areas.

Identify and order themes

Similar to "grouping" in synthesis, have your team identify themes or subject areas into which most questions fall; once you've identified the themes of your question-pool, determine the order that would allow the conversation to flow most naturally. This will enable you to structure the flow of your interview, decreasing the potential for hosting a seemingly-scattershot interaction with your user.

Refine questions

Once you have all the questions grouped by theme and order, you may find that there are some redundant areas of conversation, or questions that seem strangely out if place. Take a few moments to make sure that you leave in your planning to ask plenty of "why?" questions, plenty of "tell me about the last time you [blank]?" questions, and plenty of questions that are directed at how the user feels.



Visual adapted from Michael Barry, Point Forward

Interview for Empathy

Why interview

We want to understand a person's thoughts, emotions, and motivations, so that we can determine how to innovate for them. By understanding the choices that person makes and the behaviors that person engages in, we can identify their needs and design for those needs.

How to interview

Ask why. Even when you think you know the answer, ask people why they do or say things. The answers will sometimes surprise you. A conversation started from one question should go on as long as it need to.

Never say "usually" when asking a question. Instead, ask about a specific instance or occurrence, sich as "tell me about the last time you [blank]".

Encourage stories. Whether or not the stories people tell are true, they reveal how they think about the world. Ask questions that get people telling stories.

Look for inconsistencies. Sometimes what people say an what they do are different. These inconsistencies often hide interesting insights.

Pay attention to nonverbal cues. Be aware of body language and emotions. Don't be afraid of silence.

Interviewers often feel the need to ask another question when there is a pause. If you allow for silence, a person can reflect on what they've just said and may reveal something deeper.

Don't suggest answers to your questions. Even if they pause before answering, don't help them by suggesting an answer. This can unintentionally get people to say things that agree with your expectations.

Ask questions neutrally. "What do you think about buying gifts for your spouse?" is a better question that "Don't you think shopping is great?" because the first question doesn't imply that there is a right answer.

Don't ask binary questions. Binary questions can be answered in a word; you want to host a conversation built upon stories.

Only ten words to a question. Your user will get lost inside long questions.

Only ask one question at a time, one person at a time. Resist the urge to ambush your user.

Make sure you're prepared to capture. Always interview in pairs .If this is not possible, you should use a voice recorder—it is impossible to engage a user and take detailed notes at the same time.

- 1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RrniEJHByV4
- 2 https://etipu.co.nz/
- https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/companies/retail/the-warehouse-drops-its-swag/ ZGHP2Y7XBNPRY4BT4M4HA5XP7E/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1761606829319797&usg=AOvVaw1fSyilgyQrwXpuFpfCpUvh
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