

Beyond Bells And Whistles: Basics Matter To Shoppers



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In our continuous search for “wow-factor” merchandising in the deli, Olson Communications recently surveyed over 300 consumers to get their insight on promotions and merchandising that captivated them and made the difference to entice an impulse buy, try a new product or stimulate a brand switch. We had expected to learn about some new technology-enabled connection but found, instead, the simplest tried-and-true techniques were the ones that worked.

Enticing the Senses:

Over 90 percent of respondents said product sampling and product displays helped them make their decisions. Well-done displays and signs have stopping power and a delicious sample usually closes the deal.

The Power of the Deal: Eighty percent of respondents said coupons made a difference in their decision. Almost three-fourths said store flyers and advertising were helpful or very helpful. Although we didn't survey regular on-line customer-requested communication from a retailer, we have heard some feedback in individual interviews with consumers. They noted the primary benefits of on-line newsletters are recipes, coupons and special offers.

On My Time: The newspaper food section continues to entice 59 percent of respondents preparing for a weekly shopping trip. Sixty-one percent of consumers reacted negatively to unsolicited e-mail promotions. Unrequested or irrelevant information is considered an intrusion and can create brand aversion among retail consumers. Time is currency for today's consumers and messages that interrupt a task or waste time can have an adverse affect.

The most negative response from consumers related to loudspeaker promotions in stores — 76 percent objected. These promotions were characterized as interruptions with a message that often did not even relate to the area of the store in which they were currently shopping. Consumers noted an important distinction between enticement and interruption that could be important to retailers when selecting appropriate tactics for customers in particular stores. Customers enjoyed the offer of a sample that gave them the option to try a product and make their own decision.

Sampling That Sells: Since consumers favored sampling and most retailers have committed to sampling organizations for in-store promotions, we conducted some individual consumer interviews to find out more about sampling techniques that stand head and shoulders above the others.

We were surprised to learn those consumers' expectations of store employees and demonstrators have actually

decreased in the past five years. In a 2005 study, customers told us about deli employees who knew and understood the products they were offering and encouraged them to try new things including new products that might not be on sale at the moment. Higher-income consumers in urban markets

said their visits to local green markets were increasing and there they have the opportunity to taste and experience the passion of the local farmer, farmstead cheesemaker or artisan baker.

This year, retail shoppers told us they were more interested in seeing a clean sampling area. They were happy if samples appeared to be

fresh and were served appropriately hot or cold. There were many comments about the sampling tray with the cover that looks nice and fresh during prime time but a little scary during after-work hours with only one or two pieces of a product left to try. Off-peak hours are a challenge for displays of perishables when shoppers will use empty displays to drop unwanted product from other departments. These displays can become trash bins if not monitored consistently.

Consumers also enjoyed meeting the farmer, artisan or chef whose product was being sampled in store. A celebrity chef is always a draw, but many also noted local artisan candy makers sampling their products with passion and enthusiasm almost assured a sale. The only complaint related to the ability to purchase the product again after the special promotion, when it was stocked in an unfamiliar location or not at all.

Displays Packed With Purchase Power: Handcrafted was a very positive characteristic when it came to displays. Consumers tended to shy away from big end-aisle deli displays with colorful graphics in favor of simply packaged products with appetite appeal that appeared fresh. They expressed different motivations for shopping in the grocery aisles and noted brand, convenience and price far more often than they did for deli purchases where freshness and appetite appeal were key drivers.

Signs promoting seasonal items to call attention to a special limited time offer were well received.

The Experience Factor: Despite everything we learned about successful merchandising tactics, consumers consistently told us that their experience with the brand, the store's reputation and the ingredients were the most important factors driving their purchase decisions. There is no amount of clever, wow-factor merchandising that can compensate for less-than-brilliant performance at the basics.

Consumers are hungry for experience when it comes to food. A delicious sample, enthusiastically presented is irresistible.