

Reaching out for new sales

STUART JACKSON GOES 'BACK TO BASICS' IN THE HUNT FOR INCREASED HEALTH FOOD RETAILING SALES...

A health food shop has the opportunity to be the health and educational centre of its community, yet how many retailers reach out to local residents in a way that the average citizen can comprehend? Habit often results in us preaching only to the converted and missing out on hundreds of new customers.

Independent retailers typically derive their customer base from a radius of five miles with the core element from within just two miles. National advertising and brand building, therefore, play little part in the search for new custom. The best tools at hand begin at our shop front and end in the reading lounge of local residents.

BE REAL

The chief gaffe made in advertising is the assumption that the consumer understands something about the product on offer. As an experienced and knowledgeable retailer, it is easy to over-estimate the consumer's level of expertise and ability to empathise. In fact, many people over-complicate communication for fear of insulting the receiver's intelligence. Walk outside and take a look at the front of the store. Now imagine that you are a consumer whose general experience of food is limited to McDonald's, Asda or Tesco. Would you understand anything about your shop if you did not already know? Let's dig deeper.

THE SHOP FRONT

The name of the store is significant. Does it at least in part communicate "Health Food Shop" or does it have a trendy or family name that, while clever or ego boosting, leaves a passing consumer none the wiser? Many window displays are formed of

products piled high but with absolutely no supporting message or explanation. For instance, I recently saw a window full of Ecover products, but anyone passing who did not already shop there would have no idea what these were. It needed a catchy sign that said "eco-friendly household cleaning products" or "worried about the chemicals when cleaning your home? Try our 'Eco-Friendly Range'". With this support, the display would have communicated a pre-determined message on a hot topic to a concerned percentage of a population such as local mothers. Interest equals shop visit.

CHOOSING AND USING MESSAGES LOCALLY

In order to select the correct community messages, first appreciate the social demographics of the locale. These can be found at: www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination by entering a postcode. For example, let's take a shop located in a middle class, residential, low unemployment area with a predominantly healthy community. This would suggest a high number of educated, high disposable income family shoppers likely to have a desire for a healthy lifestyle and natural goods. Top targets would be fairtrade, organic, special diet, eco-friendly and quality issues.

BACK TO THE SHOP FRONT

The retailer above would then concentrate window displays on these messages using clearly signed displays. Themes such as "healthy snacks or lunches for children",



"help a third world farmer", "eat the best, eat organic", "interested in a healthy lifestyle?" and so on will attract diverse interest groups of passing shoppers and new customers.

Even with a strong window display, it is possible for shoppers to pass by without a glance so capture the tunnel vision walker with an outside "A" board. Use the A board to advertise a simple message on the top half of each side while the lower part can convey any detail. Now, even a brief glance from a passing shopper can receive a headline message such as "Your local Health Food Store" or "Natural & Organic Foods Inside". Alternatively, list hot consumer topics such as "Organic, Fairtrade, Special Diets" to catch attention.

For some reason health food retailers love to use precious window space to publicise other people's products and businesses. Windows are covered in advertisements for anything from Reiki healers to flats for rent. This is just daft! As is covering the window with posters of suppliers' products that say absolutely nothing to the consumer.

Remove all these; use the window to communicate your store's health message while ensuring you do not completely block the view inside.

TAKING THE MESSAGE BEYOND THE SHOP FRONT

There are only four forms of community promotion that work: leafleting, local newspapers, events and networking.

SUMMARY

Take a fresh look at your local area, the make-up of residents and how your shop's image is presented and perceived. Think through whether your own goals match the expectations of the local community and make adjustments to your retail strategy to bring these goals closer together. For many shops it is guaranteed that new business is passing the store every day, just waiting to be captured by a sharper outlook.

The least taxing of these to pioneer is leafleting, which is a surprisingly under-rated tool. Leaflets are often used for the incorrect purpose – special offers, lists of what is sold, campaigns and vouchers – when in fact their function is to communicate some basic particulars only. Focus on what and where the shop is, the opening hours and use the relevant key messages as described above. Emphasise the shop's independent ownership, introduce the team and offer friendly, knowledgeable advice.

To network, join and speak at local business and community groups, particularly those involving women. Take this a stage further by becoming an active leader in organisations and establish contact with local celebrities that may be used in future PR.

Positive national news stories can be given a community slant in press releases to local media with which a reputation as a useful local expert in health can be cemented. Suggest that they begin a health advice column and offer to write it for free in exchange for an attached shop advert.

Failing that, although advertising can be a black hole for cash, there is merit in maintaining a presence in a good local paper's health section. Occasionally, and instead of a cash investment, a deal can be struck for the shop to make available "reader offers" on the paper's behalf.

Link the shop to other like-minded businesses such as practitioners or health clubs and, where practical, create a discount exchange deal for each other's customers. If these or other similar enterprises are staging their own health fairs, get involved in those and other community events where the populace gathers.

SELL THE RIGHT PRODUCT

It is right to follow personal ethics when deciding on both suppliers and products, but don't let this destroy the overall choice on offer to the point where there is little the consumer wants from your shop. Retailers must strike a balance between offering what the consumer wants and selling what they believe in. Long term, if retailers don't meet consumer's needs, there will be no business from which to promote any personal ethics and the supermarket shall reign supreme.



If you have any questions for Talking Shop or would like further information on Stuart Jackson's consultancy service, contact him on 0131 315 0303 or email stuart@forceofnature.co.uk or visit www.forceofnature.co.uk