

Sampling is central to product promotion



Tryvertising (try-before-you-buy) is a new concept that facilitates free shopping and sampling for consumers while allowing FMCG manufacturers/distributors to promote/test a vast range of products, **Lawrence Pinto** reports

Australian Anthony James was recently in Dubai to finalise the master franchising details with UAE-based Al Khayat Investments for his brain-child Sample Central, a new tryvertising store concept that “gives consumers an opportunity to pick up a product and try it out at home before making the decision to buy”.

Come November and the first flagship of Sample Central offering over 150 products will open at Dubai Festival City, with James exuding confidence that the concept will become as popular in the MENA region as it has in several other countries.

However, there’s a small catch because ‘nothing comes free’.

‘Buyers’ first need to register as members of the ‘members-only’ Sample Central store by paying an annual membership fee of AED100 (\$27). “Also, in exchange for their ‘purchases,’ they ‘pay’ with their opinions. Consumers are required to fill out a survey form giving their views on the product they have taken home,” James points out.

To simplify the process and make it more

customer friendly, members have access to their own online portal page on the store’s website to manage their shopping experiences.

“The idea is very simple and appealing. Everyone loves anything that’s free. That’s basic human nature. So we don’t label our prod-

ucts with price tags. Shoppers ‘buy’ products based entirely on what is relevant to them and appeals to them instead of buying only what they can afford,” James explains.

Each member is allowed to pick up five items per visit per day. This means access to the store and time spent in it need to be carefully managed to keep things organised. “Members need to pre-book to shop at Sample Central outlets. Each shopping experience is limited to an hour of in-store time, at the end of which shoppers check out, head home to test their free products and submit a review. The store closes for 30 minutes at the end of every one-hour session to replenish the shelves,” he explains.



Anthony James, CEO of Sample Central

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It goes without saying that the concept of 'try-before-you-buy' has huge financial implications and benefits for the brand. "Take the example of a bottle of shampoo. Most people already know which shampoo works best for them. It's a brand they've been using for a long time. However, who can resist the chance to get another brand free. They can then try out the brand to see whether they prefer it to the brand they've been using out of sheer habit. Our surveys show 80% of consumers are ready to opt for a new brand in preference to what they use and even pay extra for it," says James, clinching his argument.

When the first store opens its doors in Dubai this November, shoppers will be able to sample around 150 different brands, which will be rotated fortnightly to ensure that no product remains in the store for over two weeks at a time. Products will include most items generally found on supermarket shelves, which means mostly FMCG products such as foodstuff, cosmetics, cleaning products, accessories, electronics etc ranging from value brands to designer labels.

Sample Central was initially launched in 2007 in Japan under the name Sample Lab. "We worked on getting the model right from 2007 to 2009, after which we announced our franchising model towards the end of 2009. The response from potential franchisees was overwhelming. We received more than 6000 applications in a day from all over the world, with Latin America showing especial interest," recalls James.

According to him, Sample Central is not a product gallery or a designer shop. Nor is it a sampling salon focused on a one-product category or a retail environment where consumers spend money.

"Today's marketplace is saturated with



Sample Central allows members to try out the latest and often new to market products

unwanted advertising samples. Everyone is familiar with such product sampling – free shampoo or cosmetic sachets on magazine covers, street-corner sampling, or unwanted samples thrust on consumers in supermarkets, hypermarkets and shopping malls. It's a matter of 'relevance', something brands need to be more concerned about. There's no guarantee their products are being sampled at the right time, in the right place, or by the right target audience. Such sampling tends to build negative brand associations," James points out.

He's at pains to point out Sample Central's uniqueness. "It allows customers/members to choose which among the latest products in the market they want to try out, many of them even new launches. It's tryvertising in the true sense, a portal that allows a brand to cut through intermediary channels, offering consumers a unique retail experience and a place to exercise a choice, while at the

same time offering FMCG manufacturers and distributors a place to promote and test products and innovations," says James.

The feedback brands gain on market performance and acceptability is equally important. "This entire process takes place in a real shopping environment in real time with a willing and accepting customer base and provides crucial feedback from members that helps brands, designers and manufacturers to revitalise established products and improve or fine-tune new launches for the mass market," concludes James.

That's what tryvertising is all about – establishing a dialogue between FMCG producers and consumers, integrating goods and services into daily life in a relevant way, and letting consumers become familiar with new products by actually trying them out. It's about letting consumers make up their minds based on experience rather than messages. ■



Sample Central that focuses on and gives consumers a choice



Sample Central is tryvertising - try before you buy