



**OUTSIDE THE BOX**

Writing instruments is not only the domain of writing pens!

# CHOICE FATIGUE

Pick a pen – with so many out there it's just as well that increased sales are gained by improving the choice you offer your customers.

BY JANE SMITH

Whoever you are, whatever you do and whatever your age we all seem to be fascinated by the world of pens. We write with them, doodle with them, some of us chew them and other use them to put their hair up!

From glittery ones, to smelly ones, fluorescent ones to good old fashioned ones there is just so much choice. But is it justified? Well according to the experts yes it is. It seems the more choice we are given the more pens we buy! And the category sure doesn't stay still. Driven predominantly by retail sales, product development is essential to maintain and keep sales growing. It seems it's as much about the style and design as it is about the ink and other technical aspects of the product.

Whilst there is still a huge volume market in the 'bog standard' ball pens, trading up has led to massive volume growth in liquid and gel inks. The quality of the ink is rising all the time with better brightness, and even flow. Ergonomics too has become an important aspect of product development with shaped barrels and rubber grips now commonplace to aid user comfort and avoid strain on the hand.

## DIP YOUR TOES IN

If ever there was a product category where sampling really works then this is it. Pens are personal and have a high-perceived value therefore people like trying the product and hold on to it. They won't automatically switch from what they usually buy but combine the

sampling with a good trial purchase offer and you will get success. Equally important though is personalisation. Make sure you know who you're sending the sample to and address it to them personally. Parcel stuffing is too expensive and not going to achieve the desired effect. The best approach will be to interrogate your database to find customers that have purchased similar products. Either post a sample or get your sales force to take the product in. That way you know it's getting to the right person. This kind of approach is ideal for new products and for trading customers up.

But writing instruments is not only the domain of writing pens. The category covers markers (permanent, drywipe and flipchart), highlighters, pencils and

specialist markers for warehouse and industrial use. Think where these products are in use regularly and target them. If you're only selling pens into an account then you're missing out somewhere! Analyse sales in your top 20 accounts and look for gaps.

## PEAK PRACTICE

Back to school and Christmas are peak selling periods for writing instruments, with high profile media campaigns and promotions from manufacturers as well as price and added value promos. And don't just think of these as retail items. What about giving it away free for orders over £10.00? Talk to your preferred suppliers to find out more about their particular plans for the rest of the year. **n**