

GOOD PENMANSHIP

The writing instruments market is huge, fickle and complicated

BY JANE SMITH

When it comes to writing instruments what constitutes value for money?

Today the writing instruments market is huge, fickle and complicated for end-users. In an attempt to build brand loyalty, expand niche applications and grow volumes we have managed to completely confuse the end-user. So much so that in fact, despite the huge amounts of marketing and promotion that goes on, largely consumers are none the wiser about the differences and benefits between one type of writing instrument and another and their only judge of value seems to come down to price.

Nich Lee, marketing manager at Staedtler said this: "Value for money is a tough one for our industry. There has been a historical lack of investment in consumer education and therefore the knowledge of why a ball pen is different from a roller ball is often not there – and forget

consumers understanding the benefits of the newer technologies! As a result, the market has become over-commoditised with 'price' alone being substituted for 'value for money' in the purchase decision as benefits are not understood and accurately valued."

Strong words indeed but then perhaps strong words are needed. For, in order to maintain stability in the price of any product (and hence margin going forward), a value for money message will need to be developed. If this does not happen then the perception of value for money will continue to focus on and drive prices downwards.

It's not total doom and gloom though as there is also evidence to show that although people don't understand the value proposition they can recognise superior writing quality and may be persuaded to trade up.

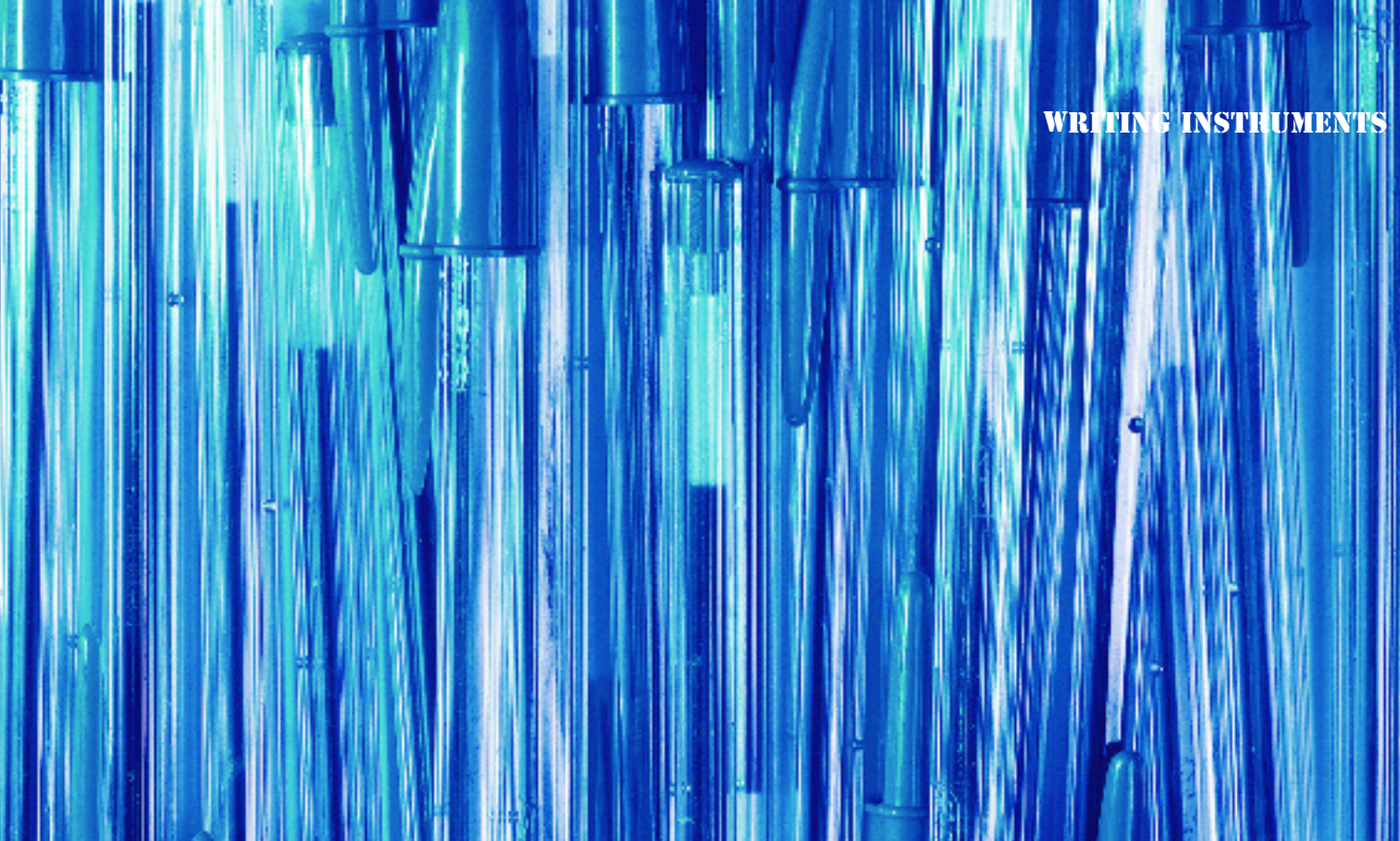
As consumers ourselves I asked around at USP and it's true we're not very knowledgeable about the

different ink types and styles of product, their characteristics or benefits. We all said we knew what we preferred to write with and yes it's true we could recognise superior writing quality. But we didn't feel that was the same as understanding a value for money message.

So, it would appear that it is a case of better education. Can your knowledge and understanding improve your chances of trading customers up?

Back in the '90s the introduction of gel ink was a revelation and allowed the development of a much wider colour range with pastels, fluorescents and metallics. Liquid ink followed and was recognised for its superb smooth writing feel. Today a new wave of ink technology innovation is bringing the consumer a range of products and benefits that had previously been unimaginable.

New low viscosity, oil-based ballpoint inks give a super-smooth writing feel. Pigment ink is water



resistant when dry and the very latest technology offers inks which can be rubbed out like a pencil, change colour with a change in temperature or give a coloured outline.

Pilot is using a new gel ink formulation that stays erasable forever. Great for exam papers and school essays! Called Erase-a-Gel this product does exactly what it says on the barrel. The ink technology allows text to be rubbed out and changed if needed.

Pentel have developed a new, low viscosity ink that writes as smoothly as liquid ink but lasts as long as a gel product. Called Energel, this new range is cost effective too because the fins needed to control the ink feed on a liquid ink product are not needed because the new ink is slightly thicker and behaves more like a gel. This keeps the cost down.

Both companies and many of their competitors are bringing much more to market. The list here could be endless and the innovation is amazing. It really is worth taking a good look around.

And it's not just the pen market we need to be thinking about. The



markers sector is also subject to similar market forces. And there's no doubt that it's tough out there for this category but the major players are responding with new product development designed to capitalise on ink technologies and design benefits and then communicating and educating the consumer.

Bic are an example of this. They have been refocusing their range by identifying the need, matching the product to fit the need and then communicating that in simple to understand terms. Take the CD marker. This was the highest growth category for everyone in 2003. This is because the need to label CDs is increasing but, more importantly, the product is clearly identified as meeting that need. This needs to be done more.

A similar example of meeting needs is the emergence of grip markers. Designed with a rubber grip barrel, they will not slip or become uncomfortable in wet or humid conditions.

Cap off time used to be a big issue as well, but today that is a thing of the past. All manufacturers have developed special inks that form a seal over the end of the nib

to stop the marker drying out when the cap is left off (a really big problem with highlighters as we remember). Cap off times are now more like four weeks than four minutes!

Staedtler is another big name in the marker category, with a heritage of reliable drawing and technical pens and equipment. Their brand Lumocolor has a recent new comer to the range, the Lumocolor Permanent Special, suitable for special applications such as writing or marking Teflon and nano-treated surfaces. It's yet another example of a product to meet a need using a combination of ink and design technology.

Our last example is the range of PaperMate Sharpie Twin Tip and Super Twin Tip. Like the name says they have two tips – one each end – designed with convenience and versatility in mind. Both products provide a choice of line widths combined in one marker.

So what are you waiting for?

Find out more about what's new and how ink technology and design benefits can win the argument when it comes to value for money over price. ■

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