

WRITE ON

We write with them, we doodle with them, some of us chew them and others may even use them to put their hair up! Jane Smith asks, do we understand the differences between one type of pen and another?



In our experience the answer is a big, fat no! All we do know is whether we are prepared to pay the 'price' and whether or not we enjoy writing with the product once we are using it.

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, consumers largely are none the wiser about the differences and benefits between one type of writing instrument and another, and their only judgement of value seems to come down to price.

An historical lack of investment in consumer education means that the knowledge of why a ball pen is different from a roller ball is quite often not there – and you can forget consumers understanding the

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

But all is not lost. Our recent talks with some of the key manufacturers show that there is a mood of change. It's not total doom and gloom either, as manufacturers continue to strive to educate and innovate. There is evidence to show that although consumers don't always understand the value proposition, they can recognise superior writing quality and can be persuaded to trade up.

We asked Alex Sinclair, marketing manager at Pilot what they were doing about educating the end user to look for value for money rather than price. He told us, "In addition to promoting the Pilot brand, a key strategy has been

to trade consumers up through the pricing structure into feature-rich versions of our popular writing instruments that have value-added attributes and higher margins for resellers.

"For example, products like our best-selling Hi-Tecpoint Liquid Ink range of rollerball pens, with exceptionally long write-out distances, provide excellent value for money. When communicating to end-users we focus on tangible product benefits, like the fact that a Pilot V5 Hi-Tecpoint writes for 2000 metres is motivation to purchase for many consumers.

"We then launched a line extension in the form of Hi-Tecpoint Grip Liquid Ink rollerball pens, with a modern, stylish new look to the barrel, including a soft rubber comfort grip. This appeals to the fashion conscious writer."

So is Pilot alone in this approach? The answer is most definitely not.



BIC recently carried out some extensive research that identified that product packaging was one of the key ways of differentiating between basic and added value products. BIC has therefore re-designed all of its packaging to make it easier for consumers to shop, making the features of the product more prominent on the packaging.

As a way of getting consumers to trial new added value products, they have implemented sampling campaigns, allowing consumers to try before they buy. BIC uses sampling campaigns and supporting activities to get it into the hands and minds of the consumer. Sampling is an excellent platform for BIC to present new products, as well as persuade consumers to trade up from their existing product to added value ranges.

Another brand leader, Staedtler, is also proactive in their end user marketing strategies and new

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product development. Mike Bird, director of sales at Staedtler UK Ltd believes in 'A brand is a promise' and that the market is changing. "It's becoming increasingly noticeable that the consumer would welcome some clear direction and product segmentation to enable them to make an informed choice. B2B business is increasingly own-label driven but here again there are definite signs of consumers being ready to pay a little more for a product that works a little better and feels a little different."

Against this background Bird believes that consumers are moving back to brands. "Firstly unless there is a yardstick by which to judge a product there is so much own brand on the market that consumers are losing perception of value. Secondly, with quality varying so much, brands are seen as 'safe', of proven quality and performance. After all a brand is a promise," he told us.

For Staedtler the emphasis is very much upon comfort and ease of writing and the recent introduction of the comprehensive and very successful triplus range, is testament to that. All ergonomically designed for effortless writing.

These are just some examples of the activity, investment and new product development work being carried out by key brand manufacturers. Without exception, there is optimism in the future but they are all aware that the work must go on to educate, persist in communicating added value benefits and bring to market quality products that consumers are prepared to pay more.

As for the future, the crowded market will undoubtedly remain fiercely competitive and very diverse but there is a definite opportunity emerging for strong brands to capitalise on increasing consumer demand for quality and reliability. ■