



THE

SCHOOL RUN

It's that time again! We look at the traditional, the not so traditional, what's appealing to consumers and what the schools are on the lookout for!

BY KNEEZ BUKHARI

The school corridors echo eerily, London buses look somewhat forlorn without their normal mass of writhing bodies packed into every available orifice, and, amazingly, you don't hit traffic on your drive into work! Yes, that's right; the kids are on summer break!

But while the AM/PM school runs are over for the next few weeks at least, another type of rush is gearing up to take place – the retail rush! You know the procedure, promotions and incentives galore, with manufacturers actively targeting kids and their parents, as well as the more mature students stocking up for college and university. The selling opportunities are endless. Think back to when you were six and couldn't wait to show all your mates your new eraser shaped like a football. Pens, pencils, paper, pads, paints, pencil cases – and that's just the P's!

"Back to School is the most important trading time of the year for the writing instruments market, second only to Christmas," says Clare Gibbard, UK marketing manager for uni-ball. Consumers will be out in their droves, looking for best buys and special offers, so make sure you know what's out there for them.

According to Emma Lawley, BIC category marketing manager, last year's Back to School period

saw an overall market increase of 6%, with retail sales now worth £45m. "Industry experts are expecting more of the same, following the introduction of new products and promotions aimed specifically at school, university and college students."

It's important for manufacturers to fuel the Back to School growth for retailers and resellers. BIC has launched a new campaign designed to drive students into local retailers. The Back to School on-pack promotion gives students the chance to instantly win a number of prizes, including digital music players and music vouchers. This kind of promotion could make the difference for consumers overwhelmed with the cavalcade of products designed to appeal to them or their children. But remember, while primary and secondary schoolchildren will, undoubtedly, be looking for the coolest, most fashionable stationery, university and college students will often purchase a more functional product that won't let them down during exams.

The typical students would be looking for everyday stationery in a variety of colours and styles. These days students are more design aware than ever, says Claire Coughtrie of Letts. The challenge, she says, "is how to keep pace with both the design trends and the discerning taste of the Back to

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**CLARE GIBBARD,
UK MARKETING MANAGER
FOR UNI-BALL.**

School market, where even at an early age students will have a clear idea of what they want." Independent retailers might want to run promotions such as 'buy one get one free' and three for two offers on key categories to capitalise on this market. Some students will also be looking to purchase everything from calculators to organizers and, for freshers, even home computers and laptops.

Michael Deane, MD of Cardinal Brands International, says the three factors that will influence student purchases in the coming year are practicality, individuality and value for money.

In the first category, the days of students humping large satchels or rucksacks to school, college or university are gone. The modern student prefers to carry one day's subject matter in easy to carry, easy to use, files and folders. In the second category, students are very much more fashion aware. They will buy products that are 'good' to be seen with, products in modern, stylish designs and in bright, vibrant colours. Thirdly, students are hard up. Everyone knows that. They will pay sensible prices for products that are disposable. These products, mostly, only have to see them through an academic year, sometimes a lot less.

Salespeople will only make a success of this opportunity by >>



having, in their product range, products that have been specifically developed for this market segment. They will not succeed if they try to re-package commercial products into consumer products.

Another opportunity that you need to take full advantage of is making sure you know what's out there for schools too. The main market is created by what teachers want and need, and their choice will be restricted by budget, so budget priced stationery will be very popular, and the smarter they look for the money, the better. Also, as more and more schools invest in whiteboards, whiteboard markers will be a popular purchase.

Which brings us on to the main selling focus this season – all things technological. The market for selling AV, and interactive whiteboards in particular, into the education sector is huge. Government initiatives have made it a virtual necessity for all educational establishments, which, for you, means the next few months will be a key selling period. Schools that are investing in ICT (Information and communication technology) in education will want it done and dusted before the new term. They have products to buy, install and get trained up on and you need to know how to sell this package to them. With the government pledging continued investment in ICT, there

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SALES DIRECTOR AT PLUS.**

are ongoing opportunities for the office dealer who's up to date with what's hot.

Schools are increasingly aware of how they can increase attention and attainment of students by creating more vibrant and visual lessons with projectors. Both on their own or as part of an ever popular bundle option with a SMART Board, projectors are an increasingly fundamental part of the modern classroom. And along with presentation equipment comes the inevitable arrangement of conference rooms and auditoriums, bringing with it the opportunity to sell desks, chairs, lighting options and so on. Additional equipment that you shouldn't neglect includes printers, faxes, phones, notebooks and photocopiers.

BECTA (The British Education Communication and Technology Agency) gives advice on how to safely incorporate projection technology in to the classroom environment. Becta recommends a maximum of 1,500 ANSI lumens which they advise is normally

adequate for projection equipment in most classroom environments. Alternatively projectors from manufacturers such as InFocus, offer two levels of brightness in one unit. These projectors run at the Becta approved level of 1500 max ANSI lumens in 'whisper mode' but can be raised to 2000 max ANSI lumens in standard mode when brighter clearer images are required for an assembly hall for example.

Despite the government's £50m dedicated funding for interactive whiteboards last year, according to Becta, on average, each school in the UK has only two interactive whiteboards. This leaves plenty of opportunities to sell this technology into schools in 2005/2006. With the versatility of interactive whiteboard screens, the prohibitive extra costs associated with plasma and LCD screens make them an unlikely choice for the classroom. However, some schools, academies and higher education institutions are investing in ICT suites, requiring complete networks, computers, presentation equipment, furniture and computer supplies and accessories.

However, much like selling to SMEs versus large corporations, different educational establishments will have different needs, budgets and outlooks on the future of their institutions.

As Brian Wood, sales director at Plus, manufacturers of projectors for Rapesco, explains, "The needs of schools and, thus, the buying decision, will have different criteria. A school, as opposed to a large corporation, will have to take into account the total cost of ownership, including initial purchase costs, running costs, replacement parts and servicing. Whereas a large company may just pay for a one-off investment, a school has to buy to a budget and its budget restraints are different. They may have to say, 'Do we pay another teacher for a week, or do we buy a projector?' for example."

So, while many of the products available this season will be needed for a term or less, many more are being invested in for the future educational needs of scores of children. Do you have a relationship with your local schools, colleges and universities? If not, then now is the time to factor them into your promotions. Now that the majority of educational institutions have a dedicated buyer in the form of the bursar, it will be easier to target your sell and effect a deal. There is no doubt that the Back to School market continues to be an important sector which provides a genuine opportunity to maximise sales. Make sure you know what's out there and who's buying. ■