



WELL SCHOOLED

Back to School is a big opportunity to raise sales, through hi-tech and low-tech products. Graeme Chapman MBE, chairman of the Office Friendly Dealer Association, tells us how.

The words 'back to school' drum fear into the hearts of many school children, but excitement and anticipation into the hearts of many office products dealers and manufacturers!

Over the last few years, the lucrative BTS market has been invaded by the big national and multi-national supermarkets. Unfortunately, so much of our independent retail culture and high street heritage has been decimated by the giant, impersonal and often bland supermarkets supplying everything from coffee to coffins!

There is still, however, a real opportunity for the independent dealer to actively generate interest and extra business in newer products and those of a technological bias.

The Office Friendly Dealer Association has a number of members who are looking to maximise their BTS season, as we have many retailers, up and down the country, who can't wait for the 'little darlings' to go BTS!

With three retail outlets, The Clunie Group in Scotland has a lot of experience in this field, and so, in addition, to the commonly used items of pens, pencils, rubbers and pads, they will be featuring scientific calculators from Sharp and Casio and inexpensive digital dictation machines from Olympus and Sanyo.

"It's important," says Clunie's Brian McMillan, "that when selling hi-tech items that you have strong back-up service, as that's where many go wrong."

Workstation in Surrey will be featuring many of the traditional best selling BTS items which this year includes rulers and geometry kits from Tiger, presentation products from Snopake, and the new Rhino and Varsity range of pads from Victor.

"Increasingly the Back To School period is starting to merge with the Back To College selling period and this latter period is one that the independent trade still dominates. Many dealers are now combining the two and taking some more adult products into the BTS initial assortment. This enables them to extend this important buying period longer and also get some more continuity in their promotions.

MIKE BIRD, DIRECTOR OF SALES FOR STAEDTLER

Director Andrew Ferguson explained, "Once we have attracted a BTS customer into our shops, it's important to not only provide the old favourites like Parker pens, but also introduce higher tech products that non specialists find hard to service."

A retail presence, while obviously helpful to the process, is not essential to maximise the BTS opportunity. Office Friendly, for example, has several members who take advantage of the season by partnering with schools or colleges.

Will Hockey of Elworthy's, in Bristol, has secured contracts with five private schools who are not afraid to spend!

"In addition to the usual fare we supply USB memory sticks, CDs, DVDs, electronic whiteboards, and Filofaxes overprinted with the school crest as a gift for leavers," says Hockey.

Orders are collated over a period of several weeks and then delivered on one day; picked, wrapped and delivered to each department.

Think Office in Ilkley has recently won the contract to supply an independent Yorkshire grammar school. Sales director Nikki Williams said, "We anticipate the peak ordering time will be the traditional BTS period and, like many commercial businesses, much of their ordering is electronic."

Outside of cyber space, retail hanging banners also prove effective during this time, as Office Friendly's commercial manager, Debbie Lee attests to. "These colourful ceiling suspended banners have become very popular and successful with retailers," says Lee, "so more manufacturers are wanting to be involved."

The potential of eye-catching advertising is something that wholesaler Kingfield Heath is also aware of, and is duly producing Point of Sale material for its retail customers in the form of A3 Posters, tent cards, shelf strips and wobblers. Graeme Hargreaves, head of retail sales for KFH, said that its 16 page A4 BTS special retail offer brochure is packed with over 100 BTS product ideas, several Q-Connect products and many new "fashion items" in eye catching packaging.

John Waites of Osborne Office, which has 21 retail outlets, subscribes to the view that the giant supermarkets are out to unnecessarily squeeze margins to "buy a share" of this lucrative trade. Nevertheless, there are still many sales

"The Back To School period is a key sales time for the whole of the office products industry. Aimed at both children and adults alike it's important to offer promotions of fun and funky products to the kids and good value for money to adults as ultimately they are the ones paying up.

We always try to run great promotions such as combining other products from our portfolio as well as money off promotions on selected packs."

ALAN MURRAY, GROUP MARKETING MANAGER FOR STATIONERY, HENKEL

to be won so, from early August to the middle of September, Osbornes will be featuring alongside the likes of Helix's Oxford Math Set and Q-Connect Correction rollers, items such as solar-powered scientific calculators, Imation CD Roms, optical 'mice', inkjet refill kits, and there is even innovation in propelling pencils, in the form of Zebra's Cadoodles fun pencils!

Not so long ago a study was made of college students regarding their spending habits. A frighteningly large proportion of them admitted that beer came before stationery in their list of priority spending (now there's a surprise!)

The fact still remains that millions of pounds are spent on office products at BTS time and that many professional, creative and determined dealers will be grabbing their share and benefiting from this bonanza. Will you be one of them? ■