



On your
marks

The marker market is innovative, broader than you might initially realize and, more pertinently, fairly impervious to economic downturns. **Chris Allsop** takes a look at this very distinctive sector.

Markers

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hen talking about product sectors, it can be a bit like talking about kingdoms in a biological sense. You can call everything that falls into the Animal Kingdom an animal, but the differences that exist between animals can be huge.

And while markers may not be as different from an automatic pencil as a sea cucumber is from a tiger, it is a sector of the writing instrument kingdom that deserves to be isolated and recognised for its unique characteristics. A main one being that markers are usually designed with a specialist task in mind, like hummingbirds.

“In terms of its difference from other writing instrument categories the sector is much more defined by usage and purpose than general writing instruments,” says Pentel’s Wendy Vickery. “The category itself encompasses permanent, drywipe, wet-erase and speciality products. Although there are any number of readily available general purpose markers that will write on most surfaces and which tend to dominate the volume sales, probably no sector of the writing instruments industry has such bouyant opportunities for niche products. End-users tend to be specific in their requirements for a product to work on a certain surface; they want to know the product won’t fade if exposed to all weather conditions and they’ll actively seek a product that delivers what it claims.”

Because of this, brand names are enjoying a resurgence in this market. Vickery says that brands are fighting back - and in many sectors holding their own against cheaper products.

“According to research house, GfK, Pentel is the market leader in permanent markers, with a share approaching 15% across all channels* (*GfK data Dec '07),” she adds. “Our performance is especially strong in the commercial sector, which reflects the trust end-users have in our established brands and the fact that they recognise the innovation in our new products. Trade brands appear to be enjoying a purple patch in the retail sector, but are remaining fairly static elsewhere.”

She adds that the issue of suitability for purpose is one of the key influencers on purchasing decision. “A marker just has to be fit for purpose, so if it costs a little bit more than an unproven product it’s a worthwhile investment.” This suitability for purpose has been picked up on by Edding, whose marketing manager, Andy Gutteridge, explains that the company now approaches the market in a different way. “Previously, our

SALES TIP

Target the training and self-development market with your marker offerings, where many professional coaches are self-employed. These buyers are very selective about the products they use to reflect the best possible impression of their skills and their business.
Wendy Vickery, Pentel



→ The manufacturers mentioned in this piece reported significant upturns in sales over the last year

products were always categorized by product type, whereas these days they are defined by application,” he explains. “As such we are now more focused on providing writing and marking solutions to different market sectors, rather than just simply supplying products.”

It's also this end user specificity at work within the sector that's mainly responsible for its resilience in the face of market downturns. In fact, most of the manufacturers mentioned in this piece reported (often significant) upturns in sales over the last year, including the OHP market, despite research house GfK reporting that the overall writing market was down.

“People still need markers to fulfill certain tasks (but perhaps lay off the purchase of expensive fountain pens),” says Stabilo's Sarah Noye. “And this OHP growth is particularly surprising because, as you mentioned, we are seeing a general decline in the presenting market due to the increase use of beamers and other computer equipment. As a result OHP markers are sometimes being rebranded as “Universal markers” which can be used for a number of tasks such as memo boards/wipe boards, transparent maps, and permanent marking.”

Of course, innovation in the marker sector isn't just about the clever remarketing of old product. As Nich Lee, marketing manager of Staedtler (UK) points out, “it's the marker's ability to write on almost anything that sets this sector apart and drives product development”.

This includes such developments as ink that dries in three to six seconds, making ink colours lightfast for up to 10 years, dry markers that will write on stone, wood, lacquered and coated surfaces, caps can be left off markers for days at a time without the pen drying up. “Ink and lead technology are continually developing to introduce new features to meet increasing demands,” explains Lee.

Retractable markers have also been making their mark on the sector of late, alongside pump-action features which mean that if the ink colour starts to fade a button on the end of the barrel will revive the flow and refresh the colour when pressed.

However, it's not all new and improved driving sales in the marker sector. That old office staple, the highlighter, is, according to GfK's Fit for Office report, showing growth. Noye reports that Stabilo's

highlighter sales last year, thanks to a Back To School boost based around a limited edition product, saw its highlighter category grow by 38%.

“We believe these impressive sales figures showed that, while the office sector still look to markers as pens that simply perform a function,” she adds, “the Retail sector has seen a potential for markers as lifestyle accessories and consumers are picking products according to design as well as functionality.”

So there you have it, more innovative than a sea cucumber and less lethal than a tiger, the marker sector is resilient and continuing its positive trends. Jump on board this lasting beam of sales sunlight while the dark clouds of a recession continue to gather. ●

HERE COMES THE SCIENCE!

OHP pens are developed for brilliant colours when used on transparent foils. Normally, when light hits a surface, some light is absorbed, some is scattered and some is transmitted, depending on the optical characteristics. For scattering to take place, the particles in the surface must be bigger than a quarter of the wavelength. Therefore, the dyestuff molecules in an ink will mostly absorb or transmit light. The paper below then reflects most of the transmitted light, and on the way back the same absorption and transmission takes place.

What you see is the remaining light which has passed two times through the dyestuff. So blue ink actually is transparent for short wavelengths (blue light), but absorbs the longer wavelengths in the visible spectrum.

On transparencies this process takes place only once, so the dyestuff has to be more intense than normal. Some dyestuffs absorb only in a narrow part of the spectrum, whereas others have wider absorption bands, and this can make the colour look dark and dirty in transmission while giving a brilliant colour when combined with a white substrate. For this reason, the pen uses a high concentration of selected dyestuffs with narrow transmission bands which give brilliant colours in transmission. On paper, however, the pen looks very dark because so much light is absorbed.

Sarah Noye, Stabilo