

PLAN FOR SALES

Always a safe bet for sales, how are paper based diaries, calendars and planners faring against the rise of electronic competitors and cheap imports from the East?

Chris Allsop reports.

Unless the powers that be are planning a big overhaul of the passage of time anytime soon, daily planners and all of their ilk can be relied upon to remain in the same format, to come out at the same time each year and to be bought, regular as Swiss clockwork. But have the returns from this sector been diminished lately by the influx of cheap competition from the East and the rise of electronic personal organisers?

Sue Kenyon, Acco's visual communication commercial market manager for the UK, reports no such negative trends, instead adding happily that her company's Sasco planner sales are as buoyant as ever.

Says Kenyon, "Research suggests electronic organisers impacting personal planning tools such as diaries but not shared planning devices (Sasco planners). People still like the 'at a glance' function of a Sasco planner – easy reference and available to all, even those not on computers."

Despite Kenyon's research, Collins Debden and Filofax both report strong sales, with the latter's communications manager, Matt Watson, saying that, "UK sales for the period 2001 to 2004 have shown a 60% increase – a far higher level of sales even than the 1980s, the perceived heyday of our brand".

Furthermore, Watson says that electronic organisers have not had much effect on Filofax' pricing thanks to the trend of consumers using an electronic organiser in tandem with a paper one.

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Letts also sends good tidings regarding the diary market, with marketing manager, Claire Coughtrie pointing out that the retail market is bouyant with non traditional outlets, such as supermarkets, taking diaries.

Good news on that front, but what about the problem of cheap imports? Scott Darroch, commercial sales manager for Collins Debden, while acknowledging the threat posed, believes that low-cost imports comprise such a different offering that is hard to draw comparisons. The defence for Darroch's brand lies in the '150 years of manufacturing experience and brand building'.

"As in many sectors, there will be a less expensive alternative, however, those customers choosing a Collins product are assured of a whole lot more," he adds.

Acco also employs effective marketing to keep its head above the swamp of cheap imports. Kenyon describes how educating consumers in the art of planning >>



and ensuring they understand what additional features are available is key to combating price erosion.

"Lowest cost is usually lowest spec," she says. "Planning products are bought as a tool that simplifies life and, in a complex and busy world, consumers will usually select functionality over price, but only within realistic and acceptable parameters. It's a matter of balancing price with features."

Speaking of features, does this very traditional market see much innovation? What can the dealer salesperson get excited about this year in terms of product development?

Sue Kenyon reports that Sasco is bringing some new products to market this year (2007). Following on from consumer research, Acco is planning to launch a super-compact planner for offices where space is limited and easy to carry planners in an A3 size.

"Most innovative is a range of magnetic planners intended for installation onto filing," says Kenyon. "This is in response to many offices now moving to open plan designs and having clean wall policies. This solution means you can still plan in a comfortable way even if you don't have walls."

Filofax refreshes between 35 and 40% of its entire personal organiser range on an annual basis. The focus here is women's fashion-led products. "Sophisticated trend forecasting techniques are used to ensure that these products are continually in line with changing fashion trends," explains Watson.

Even the century and a halfer, Collins, keeps up to date with its



offering. Darroch says that the industry has become a lot more diverse, from standard desk diaries for commercial use to high fashion diaries with printed fabrics, packed full of extras and relevant editorial.

"Through an understanding of our customers (dealers and retailers) plus a comprehensive knowledge of consumer trends it allows us to continue to produce a unique offering within this sector," he adds.

Another indicator of the health of this sector is Collins' bullish proclamation to build upon on areas where it has a market leading advantage.

"We also have aggressive plans to expand areas of the business that do not have the comfort of market leadership," says Darroch, "but where we feel our reputation and manufacturing expertise will make us a considerable challenger in these areas."

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Filofax is equally focused, with an 'intensive' on-going new product development programme in place with new products continually being released to meet changing consumer tastes and demands. In recent years, reports Watson, this has led to the introduction of more coloured product to the personal organiser ranges, the addition of co-ordinated leather goods such as briefcases and purses, and a move into Filofax pens and pencils.

"This development is set to continue," he adds, "especially as the use of paper-based products for organisation seems to be undergoing a revival in the UK."

Also hitching its cart to the fashion bronco is Letts, where Coughtrie reports that new product development has consisted of new designs and experimenting with new treatments on traditional materials, such as flock onto polypropelane.

"We view it as important to keep watching not only stationery markets but also the fashion and home interior sectors," she adds.

All good news considering that one of the perks of these household names is their reputations for quality, something that comes with a suitably costly price tag attached. As Acco's Sue Kenyon advises, "Maximise profit through promoting branded higher value products that deliver consumer satisfaction. If it works for a consumer they will buy it year after year."

Which means that you can confidently mark down when to approach the sale again next year, in your personal organiser (paper, of course). ■