

# Cut the Mustard

**Y**es, it is critically important to understand how the mindset of the shopper is different from that of the consumer. But we must not forget that the shopper and the consumer is *the same person*. The greatest challenge of shopper marketing is, in fact, connecting the shopper experience to the consumer experience.

The most important insight of all is how shoppers plan to use what they buy once they're back home, once again living their lives as consumers.

To that end, the most important thing we can do to help is re-design the center of the store because that's where the disconnect between shopping and consuming is most pronounced. Most center-store aisles are jammed with almost comical, and certainly nonsensical, overabundance that is completely divorced from reality.

I mean, have you ever looked at the imported mustards at your local grocery store? Go to what used to be called the glass aisle (talk about a lack of shopper orientation!). Once you get past the French's and the Grey Poupon's, you'll find 30-50 SKUs of fancy, expensive — and dusty — jars of mustard that nobody ever buys.

It's not just the mustard. If the average supermarket has 30,000 SKUs, the truth is that probably a third of those have very little sales impact.

Tesco's Fresh & Easy, among others, has edited down its product assortment to make it easier to shop their stores. That's the right direction, but the larger

opportunity is to re-arrange the shelves with shoppers in mind.

## REALITIES AT RETAIL

The point is, now that we're having a conversation about the shopper, it's time to face reality about what's really going on in the store. Part of that reality is that many retailers have done a great job with their meat, seafood, produce, deli and bakery departments. The shopping experience around the store's perimeter can, in fact, be quite good in some stores.

Unfortunately, the center of the store usually is anything but an engaging or exciting experience. It's where shopping for groceries starts to feel like work. It's not just that there are 32 kinds of mustard that nobody buys. It's that there's little rhyme or reason to the way stores are organized from a shopper's perspective.

Let's talk about snacks for a moment.

When we shop, we're not really thinking about buying cookies versus candy versus salty snacks. We're thinking about snacks. But where are they? Well... they're scattered across the stores, in aisle two, aisle four, aisle seven and aisle nine. Why is that?

It's because we don't see the store the way shoppers do. We think about categories and take a very orderly, linear view of how the store ought to be organized. We've become so category-centric in our thinking that we've lost sight of what those categories mean outside the four walls of the store, out in the real world.

The fact is, those categories mean almost nothing after the shopper leaves the store. This is what has prevented us from getting at the kinds of insights that will lead to a better shopping experience and really pay off this whole notion of "shopper marketing."

It's not as scary as it sounds.

In some ways, it is easier to make changes in the center of the store than on the perimeter, because there's not as much waste and inefficiency on the perimeter. Once the assortment is streamlined, all sorts of possibilities open up.

#### WHERE TO START

Granted, it's not easy to decide where to start. The good news is that there are an almost infinite number of things that can be tested or put in front of shoppers to see how it might affect their behavior. The bad news is that there are almost an infinite number of things to put in front of shoppers to see how it might affect their behavior!

First of all, we need to come up with viable and testable concepts, but which are viable to test? We need a filtering process to determine what's real and doable.

Second, once we identify a concept that's viable and testable, how do we execute against it? Retailers aren't about to let manufacturers blow up their categories on the off chance that things might look better after the dust settles.

A handful of leading-edge brands are trying to overcome that hurdle with new technologies that digitize every SKU in a given store and present the result in a 3-D, virtual-reality format. One of the most sophisticated programs, offered by U.K.-based Red Dot Square, creates a level of interactivity and virtual reality that it's fair to say rivals that of the Nintendo Wii.

I recently "test drove" this program, which Red Dot Square calls VISSRAE, at one of its 50 U.S. research centers, most of which are located at shopping malls. I stood in front of a 50-inch HD plasma TV, with my hands grasping what felt like a shopping cart handle. It's actually just a handlebar attached to a giant joystick, but the effect is surprisingly realistic.

I walked in from the parking lot, entered the store (Red Dot Square can replicate any kind of retail format). I walked up and down the aisles, taking items off the shelves via touch-screen technology, reading all sides of the 3-D packages and placing items in my cart. Everything was adjusted so that my perspective matched my height, and biometric technology tracked what I noticed inside the store and what I didn't.

The software allows the retailer or manufacturer simply to swap out a brand or completely relocate an entire section to another part of the store. You can walk up any aisle and either buy things the way the store is configured today, or re-configured to test new possibilities.

Afterwards, I spoke with Wayne Link, a vice president with Red Dot Square, who said that the idea was to all but eliminate what separates virtual reality from reality. He told me about a test Red Dot Square did with Kimberly-Clark and Safeway to see what would happen if the seven categories of baby-care items Kimberly-Clark currently sold across four or five aisles

were grouped together under various, shopper-centric themes.

They didn't change the SKUs, the price, or anything else in the marketing mix. The only thing that changed was that products were grouped the way consumers use them. Wayne says that sales grew by more than 20 percent in those seven categories.

Through testing and insights, we might prove that this kind of approach creates a better shopping experience, and increases sales as a result. Shoppers become loyal customers because they're finding solutions, as opposed to an impressive but irrelevant assortment of mustards. Shoppers and consumers are satisfied in a holistic fashion.

Yes, we can deliver on the promise of shopper marketing, but clearly we need to be able to test what works and what doesn't without the risk and expense of turning stores into laboratories.

We need to identify and quantify the potential key business drivers, and narrow down to those most likely to have a positive effect. For the first time, we have the kind of technology we need to allow us to do just that. ■

## Red Dot Square uses virtual reality to reinvent the center of the store.



**MICHAEL SHINALL** is CEO of **Meridian Consulting Group**, specialists in helping brand marketers gain competitive advantage through strategic working relationships with retailers. He can be reached at [shinallm@meridianconsulting.com](mailto:shinallm@meridianconsulting.com)