

Play the waiting game

Retailers are trying their utmost to minimise queues and yet use the time to communicate with customers. While this may be useful, get it wrong and you will alienate them. By Jo-Anne Flack

Standing in a Post Office queue recently with two small children, I was horrified to see a dump bin placed near the front of the queue piled high with children's drinking cups adorned with cartoon characters. The just-manageable feat of keeping two toddlers under control in a long queue suddenly turned into a battle about why we weren't going to buy the plastic cups that were understandably so appealing to them. The cynicism of the strategy made me vow never to darken the doors of that post office again.

And this is the inherent problem with trying to develop point-of-purchase (PoP) communications for those times and places where people are waiting, with varying degrees of patience. Queueing is not what people choose to do. In a time-pressured environment, it is unlikely that people will be willing to consider new information. If customers are presented with a message that jars in any way, the communication will at best be wasted, but will more likely prompt a negative response.

But fragmentation of the media and the increasing desperation of marketers and their agencies to find new communication avenues mean this PoP strategy is not likely to go away. Group business development director at brand communication agency Loewy, Cliff Hall, says the key is to attend to the "waiting consumer". "People want things instantly, so there is nothing positive to be said about waiting in a queue. The solution has to be to try to make that time easier for the consumer," he says.

Hall cites the work that Loewy has done for Moto, the motorway service organisation. Café Ritazza, part of the Moto portfolio, provides self-service coffee, tea and snacks.



Agency and client examined the maps of each Moto outlet to see how long queues affected business. "We then installed an infra-red beam that monitors the queues. When we think people would lose patience and move off, an audio voice is triggered inviting them to visit an alternative self-service facility located opposite," he says.

TRY TALKING TO THEM

Hall explains that, particularly in retail outlets where money transactions slow things down, the trick is to communicate with people while they are still waiting. "Don't wait until people get to the front of the queue before you talk to them."

Head of brand and marketing strategy at 23red Alexa Gooder used to work in the Cabinet Office. Through her experience of disseminating public information to hard-to-access audiences, Gooder discovered a useful route for these communications. "We have been using the Benefits Agency Publicity Register (BAPR) to great effect to achieve grassroots coverage of our clients in public places such as

doctors' surgeries, Job Centres and Post Offices. The register covers over 30 organisations reaching 54,000 venues and advertisers can select which channels they wish to use depending on their objectives and target audience.

"The list offers an excellent route to communicate with hard-to-reach audiences such as parents, the elderly, the unemployed or students. As communication material is requested by the channels, it needs to be useful and informative rather than overtly commercial to encourage take-up."

But for some, the commercial gain, or loss, from queues is crucial. Supermarkets have been adept at analysing how queues will affect their business.

Mark Runacus, planning director at relationship marketing agency Hicklin Slade & Partners, says: "Tesco has worked out that for every extra minute a customer stands waiting in a queue, the store loses a certain amount of money. It has worked incredibly hard to reduce till queueing time from five minutes to two minutes."

But supermarkets are playing a double game. They are reducing the queue times, but there has also been a noticeable change in the products sold at the tills. Gone is the confectionery so loathed by mothers and in are the brochures advertising financial services.

"You don't need dwell time to advertise these products. People aren't going to make snap decisions about car insurance or a home loan. In the increasingly short time that people spend in queues, they pick up the literature and take it home to read carefully," says Runacus. "So supermarkets can claim that they have acknowledged consumer pressure by getting rid of the confectionery, but in fact what they have done is just increase the amount of space they use to sell their own-branded products."

AVOID THE CLUTTER

The final word has to go to David Harris, creative partner at brand response agency LIDA. "Marketers are using all these media opportunities to pump messages out and it's like electronic wallpaper."

Harris's reference to electronic wallpaper indicates his scathing views on the use of plasma screens. "We're some years away from the world of *Minority Report* where an on-screen message addresses someone by name. At a time when advertisers are looking for more targeted communications, it's impossible to tailor this medium to the most receptive consumers. There is a huge danger that on-screen media will alienate the very people it is trying to attract.

"We spend our whole lives trying to get rid of clutter with ambitions for paperless offices and minimal interiors. But outside, life is getting more cluttered. People are going to demand an end to it," he says. ●