Prelude case Sheba: the pets' St Valentine's Day

PEDRO QUELHAS BRITO
Universidado do Porto, Portugal

Several years of growth averaging 22 per cent year on year have attracted more than 60 new brands from both local and multinational companies to Portugal's €350 million pet food market. EFFEM-Portugal, whose brands include Sheba, Whiskas and Pedigree Pal, has over half of the pet food market but not all its brands were doing well.

EFFEM had played an important role in developing the market. Much of its success came from understanding the behaviour of both pets and their owners. For example, cats are resolved animals. They eat what they like and leave what they dislike. A cat is selective and sensitive regarding its nutritional needs and taste. If given food it dislikes, a cat seeks an alternative. Dogs are different. A hungry dog will eat almost anything, and eats it quickly. For cat food the main concern is to give pleasure and to provide variety. For dogs it is volume and ease of consumption.

The Valentine's card showed two cats, probably lovers . . .

Sheba is EFFEM's super-premium brand for cats. With its exceptional quality and its high price, it aims to delight the most discerning cats and is particularly appropriate for special occasions. But Sheba was in trouble. After initial advertising and sales promotional support during its launch, it had been left to fend for itself in the increasingly competitive pet food market. After several years of trading, Sheba's market position and even its commercial existence were threatened by the absence of marketing support and the entrance of new competitors into its market niche. Only 9 per cent of the total market had ever bought a can of Sheba at least once. Sheba's low market share of just 2 per cent justified little promotional expenditure, but for Sheba it was fight back or die.

EFFEM's answer was a two-stage point of sale promotion, with each stage costing as little as a 30-second prime-time TV commercial. Stage one was during the run-up to Christmas. In-store demonstrators approached consumers and asked them if they owned a cat. If customers answered 'yes', they were offered a greetings card and a 100-gram can of Sheba. In this way both owners and pets received a gift. This sampling raised customers' brand awareness and knowledge of Sheba. Besides giving information, the card encouraged the pet's owners to show their love for their cat by giving it Sheba because 'it deserves it'. The card and its message were designed to generate favourable feelings. After all, it was Christmas time and this 'Santa Claws' gave away 12,000 cans of very special Sheba.

The second stage of the campaign repeated the Christmas promotion, but with St Valentine's Day as the theme. The Valentine's card showed two cats, probably lovers, with the messages: 'Because today is a special day, Sheba has a gift for your cat' and 'Let it know how you love [your cat]'. During the campaign 11,900 cans were given to customers at the point of sale. The Valentine's card also doubled as a cash-back coupon with a face value of €0.50. The refund and the emotional appeal of the message helped customers to confirm their preference for Sheba while showing their love for their cat.

The promotions reversed Sheba's sales decline. The impact on brand awareness/knowledge and repeat purchase was evident and the percentage of consumers who had ever tried Sheba increased to 22 per cent. ,

Questions

1. Is Sheba based on the tastes of cats or their owners?
2. Does the consumer awareness and knowledge achieved account for the success of the Sheba campaign? If not, what does account for the success?
3. Given that Sheba's sales promotion campaign was so much more successful than conventional advertising, why is it not used more often?