Eye-tracking insights for enhancing shopper marketing

FROM SCOTT YOUNG

MANUFACTURERS AND retailers have a shared interest in enhancing shopper marketing. However, very few point-of-sale marketing efforts are rooted in shoppers’ in-store perspective. Using mobile eye-tracking, we can document exactly what shoppers see (and miss) throughout their path-to-purchase, including ‘macro-level’ behaviour (such as store/aisle navigation) and ‘micro-level’ actions (leadership of packaging and POP materials).

Here are some patterns that have emerged across countries, categories and retail channels, and what works and what does not.

A GREAT DEAL OF SHOPPER MARKETING INVESTMENT IS WASTED

Often this is due to poor placement. In a beverage study we conducted in the US and Argentina, eye-tracking revealed that not a single shopper (from more than 100 people) looked upward to engage with overhead promotional signage in aisles – a finding largely consistent with our experience across studies. Shoppers use ceiling-based materials to guide store navigation, but once they are in the aisle, their focus is ahead or slightly downward. Thus, materials at eye or arm level are far more visually impactful.

We also found that excessive in-store merchandising often overwhelms shoppers, rather than helping them. In a recent study for a technology marketer (across eight retail chains), 85% of shoppers engaged with product displays and fact tags, but other POS materials (including selector guides) were only considered by 10–15% of shoppers. As a result, the company redesigned its critical materials and eliminated others, saving money and leading to an easier shopping experience.

DISPLAYS AND SIGNAGE CAN BE VALUE-ADDED IN SHOPPING PROCESS

Displays and signage can be valuable in creating visibility and attention – and helping brands to create a ‘beacon’ in the aisle. They can also drive impulse purchases, particularly when coupled with a compelling price/value message. Displays can also present an opportunity to connect emotionally and viscerally with shoppers, through visual imagery that links to users and usage occasions. However, when messaging gets too complex, it is almost always ignored.

POS materials can be viewed as closer to an extension of advertising, in terms of their ability to drive awareness/attention, to create an emotional connection and convey a single key message. Conversely, packaging is often more factual and ‘rational’ in its nature. As shoppers get closer to their actual purchase decision, they are typically looking for key information and reassurances.

FOCUS ON FACILITATING SHOPPING, RATHER THAN IMPEDING IT

While this point might appear self-evident, it is frequently ignored as signage often obstructs packaging (and thus limits information delivery).

A recent eye-tracking study revealed that shoppers were actively avoiding POS stickers on freezer case doors, in order to ‘find’ the products behind them. Shelf labels were more effective, as they helped shoppers navigate the aisle – and didn’t block their view of packaging.

The growth of shelf-ready packaging (SRP) has highlighted the importance of making packaging and POS materials work together. If leveraged properly, SRP can help drive visibility, facilitate shop-ability and/or convey an important brand message. If not, it can compromise packaging communication, by blocking its visibility and accessibility and/or leading to poor pack orientation.

Thus, it is important to design SRP to complement the packaging, by focusing on a specific communication objective. For example, if a brand family is large and complex, SRP may facilitate shop-ability, perhaps via colour coding or calling out varieties or sub-brands. In other cases, SRP may be best used to convey a clear, differentiating and motivating brand message.

BEST PRACTICE FOR DRIVING IN-STORE COMMUNICATION

1. Use Microsoft Excel

Effective marketing efforts should start with ‘baseline’ studies, which uncover shoppers’ decision-making processes, document the role of packaging, the paths-to-purchase, and record ‘retail realities’ across key channels (lighting, shelving, etc.). These insights can then be incorporated within the design brief, to ensure that materials are developed with specific retail challenges and shopper-focused objectives in mind.

2. Integrate packaging, SRP and POS design

Many companies have internal silos (between sales and marketing, packaging and POS, etc.) that lead to different materials being created in isolation. Companies need to think, design (and ideally organise) around the larger vision. At a minimum, creative efforts should start with both a strategic and tactical understanding of how packaging and POS will work together.

3. Assess full in-aisle solutions

Finally, marketers must ensure that new systems are working within the larger store context. When actual test stores are not feasible, we have been using virtual tools or retail labs to show new concepts in the full aisle context. In a recent study, we simulated several different in-aisle scenarios for the lighting category and measured their impact on brand visibility, purchase patterns and shop-ability. Predictably, we found that the combination of elements (new packaging, shelving and in-aisle signage) had a stronger impact than a packaging change alone. These findings then helped the manufacturer ‘sell-in’ a new approach to a retail partner.

By thinking more holistically, marketers and retailers can gather insights and evidence to develop solutions that ensure that their shopper marketing efforts are working efficiently and effectively.

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Above right: heat maps from the P&G eye-tracking research