How Mars Wrigley Is Trying to Bring Impulse Buying Online

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Confectionery manufacturers have long benefited from the human tendency to purchase products on impulse. That same instant gratification, however, simply isn't available when shopping on the internet. The economics of shipping a single chocolate bar just don't add up, and that's why candy companies have been slow to hop on the direct-to-consumer bandwagon.

Now, one candy company exploring how to navigate the DTC trend: Mars Wrigley, the over 100-year-old maker of such sweets as Skittles, 3 Musketeers, Snickers and M&Ms.

"If you want something right now—whether you want to reward yourself, or you need a mid-morning snack—you're not going to go online, buy it, then wait two days for it to be delivered," said TJ Kanaris, head of seasonal marketing at Mars Wrigley.

While current data from Placer.ai, an analytics firm that tracks foot traffic, shows no year-over-year decrease in consumers visiting the nation's top grocers, the concern is that a rise in ecommerce will eventually lead to fewer people wandering down store aisles. Survey numbers from Coresight Research released last May, for example, found that 37% of U.S. shoppers bought groceries online at some point in the past year, up from 23% in 2018. Fewer consumers waiting in line at the checkout counter means fewer impulse buying opportunities, and a potential loss in revenue for the makers of candies and sweets.

In an attempt to foster similar behavior in a digital

marketplace, Kanaris explained that Mars Wrigley employs a variety of techniques. First, much like how physical retailers strategically place candy and sweets at various locations throughout a store, thinking about where and how an item appears online is equally important.

“Product placement is critical,” he said. “In a lot of respects, if you’re not on the first page of a retailer’s digital site, you’re likely not to get purchased.”

A quick search for “candy” on sites such as Amazon, Walmart and Target brought up Mars Wrigley products organically on the front page, along with some instances of sponsored results.

Another approach is matching products with occasions and rituals that have a strong online presence, especially holidays, when Mars Wrigley tends to sell more multipacks than individual items. One example of this is placing paid ads on sites that feature baking recipes, Kanaris said. (Mars Wrigley did not respond to requests to identify specific recipe websites it targets with advertising.)

Kanaris also stressed leveraging sales data and consumer surveys to make sure messages hit the right consumer at the right time. In the case of Mars Wrigley, the company sees more purchases related to decorations and baking in the first half of the Christmas season (think red and green M&M’s), followed by more gift-related purchases in the latter half (think Celebrations bottles filled with an assortment of candies, from Twix to Milky Way).

Although it’s unclear how many online confectionery purchases are impulsive, as opposed to preplanned, statistics point to a growing number of people using the internet to buy their sweets. Numbers from market research firm Euromonitor International reveal that online confectionery retail sales in the U.S. grew from $715 million in 2017 to $1.19 billion in 2019—a 66% increase. During that same time period, in-store

confectionery sales, though significantly larger, remained relatively flat, climbing 3% from $32.6 billion to $33.5 billion.

Mars Wrigley declined to share raw sales data, but said the company is experiencing a similar trend of faster growth online than in-store. Holidays, the company added, are becoming increasingly important for online sales.

On a broader scale, online retailers of all sorts are attempting to facilitate impulse buys through a number of means. After examining 200 top U.S. ecommerce websites, researchers at the University of Michigan found that common strategies include deep discounts, lowered perceived risk through generous return policies, and social influence via product ratings and reviews.

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