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PHOENIX — Wal-Mart's sampling program not only drives an average sales lift of 124% on the day the item is demoed, but also improves movement of the product four weeks afterwards by an average of 29%, according to Terry Nannie, senior director of marketing for Wal-Mart.

He shared the details of its revamped sampling program here last week at the Grocery Manufacturers Association's Merchandising, Sales and Marketing Conference.

“Sampling reduces the chance of having a negative new product experience,” Nannie said.

But before adopting its new model, sampling interactions weren't always positive. “There was inconsistent staffing quality, an unpredictable shopper experience, no performance evaluations and 60% on day execution,” he explained.

At the problem's root were issues related to personnel.

Stations were staffed by an independent contractor to whom the marketing company hired by Wal-Mart's supplier outsourced the task. Associates manning demo stations weren't always engaging and there was little accountability.

“We had to improve the shopping experience for female customers; they make up more than 70% of our business,” Nannie said.

Competing sales agencies Advantage Sales and Marketing and Crossmark created Shopper Events, which is operated under a shared-services agreement, to oversee Wal-Mart's sampling events.

“We asked ourselves how can we turn sampling into an amazing experience,” said Tanya Domier, president of marketing for Advantage Sales and Marketing.

Shopper Events started by ensuring that all personnel responsible for executing demos at Wal-Mart are W-2 and I-9 employees who've undergone background checks and are food safety certified.

In-store execution rates have climbed to 95%.

“In the past you'd have members of a workforce who might show up one day and maybe not come back,” Domier said.

Today, these associates have become such a fixture at Wal-Mart that shoppers have begun to recognize them.

“My wife shops the local Wal-Mart store and she's actually gotten to know these associates since she sees them time and again,” Nannie said.

The Wal-Mart sampling experience has also been improved thanks to three newly designed event stations — two for use with food and one with general merchandise. The carts allow for a more sterile eating environment.

“Some have sinks and that's got our fresh food department excited,” said Nannie.

In the past, Wal-Mart couldn't demo produce since sampling stations weren't equipped with sinks.

Sampling has proven to be more effective in some categories than others.

On the day of events, grocery sales on average are lifted 99%, candy 386%, pet 245%, dairy 151%, frozen food 78%, home entertainment 17% and fresh bakery 276%.

Sampling is particularly beneficial for new items, which receive an average lift of 57% four weeks post event. One item that returned better-than-average results were Bertolli frozen meals, whose sales rose 162% one month after the event, as compared to sales in stores where the product wasn't sampled.

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