

Nielsen Insights in Action: New Markets, Beefed Up Sales

Ball Park relies on Nielsen to identify untapped profit pools



Company Ball Park Franks

First served in 1957 to fans attending Detroit Tigers baseball games, Ball Park Franks quickly grew from a local sporting event treat to one of America's favorite hot dogs. A classic advertising campaign touting the hot dogs that "Plump when you cook them!" only increased Ball Park's brand recognition over the years.

Despite its acquisition by Sara Lee in 1989, Ball Park remained a distant number two player in the \$1.6 billion hot dog category. In 2005, an attempt to ignite growth through large summer promotions aimed at adult males generated disappointing results. The company realized that gaining ground on its main competitor would require a fresh look at hot dog consumers and a corresponding shift in its marketing and product development strategies.

Company Facts

Ball Park Franks

- Founded in 1957 as the exclusive hot dog supplier of the Detroit Tigers
- Varieties include Angus, Beef, Turkey, Fat Free, Cheese
- Acquired by Sara Lee Corp. in 1989

The Business Issue

Seeing the need to attract new customers, Ball Park partnered with The Cambridge Group, a division of The Nielsen Company, to help identify its most profitable opportunities going forward. For years, Sara Lee had geared many of its marketing efforts toward the group responsible for eating more hot dogs than any other: men who grill out during the summer months. Ball Park believed this segment, which accounted for roughly 10% of hot dog sales, represented its strongest prospect for growth.

But as numerous competitors battled over this key demographic, it became clear to Cambridge and Ball Park that improving sales would mean concentrating on new, untapped demand profit pools.

The Solution

By taking a look at a wider range of hot dog consumers, Cambridge found a vast, year-round market that had been virtually ignored by the hot dog industry: teen and "tween" boys. Research confirmed what many parents know about their own middle and high schoolers – these boys tend to eat large amounts of food and often gravitate toward options that are easy to prepare. In a number of ways, they were the perfect consumers for the foods Ball Park offered.

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Case Study

Meeting these consumers' demands meant addressing both the boys and their moms. Sara Lee embarked on a multi-faceted marketing approach. The Ball Park team embarked on a savvy advertising approach that used online videogame sites such as Major League Gaming to reach the boys. The company's messaging emphasized the convenience of its product – an important factor for kids grabbing a quick after-school snack. Cambridge surveys showed moms felt more comfortable with all-beef hot dogs than other varieties, and all-beef subsequently became the focus of Ball Park's new strategy. Therefore Sara Lee developed new marketing tactics aimed at moms to demonstrate that Ball Park hot dogs were high-quality foods for their children.

“The success of our partnership with The Cambridge Group has been unmistakable.”

*Philippe Schaillee,
Chief Marketing Officer of Sara Lee
North American Retail & Foodservice*

“Identifying a promising new customer segment is important, but the next challenge is persuading these individuals that you have the right product for their needs,” said Philippe Schaillee, chief marketing officer of Sara Lee North American Retail & Foodservice. “Digging deeper and understanding their interests and motivations gave us the framework to develop an effective campaign.”

Though Cambridge's research had resulted in an interesting new teen market, Ball Park wanted to go a step further by aligning its product portfolio with consumer demand. The key for Cambridge was building an extensive palate map that documented which characteristics consumers like and don't like about hot dogs. In the process, the company found another large, under-served piece of the market: eaters of “super-premium beef.” While they comprised a whopping 22% of the palate map, these taste- and texture-sensitive consumers accounted for just 6% of industry sales. The findings suggested tremendous potential for a new, high-end product – Ball Park's Angus Beef Franks, introduced in 2008.

A Win-win Outcome

Ball Park soon discovered that reaching out to new audiences was just what it needed. Within nine months, more male teens and tweens were asking for Ball Park by name, thanks to Sara Lee's demand-based strategy and marketing. Within a year, household penetration had grown 3.5 points, faster than any other brand in the entire Sara Lee line up.

Ball Park's Angus Beef Franks proved just as successful. In three years, Ball Park's sales rose nearly 40% to \$400 million, with much of its growth coming from the new Angus product. Meanwhile, the company's market share climbed from 18% to 21%. Sara Lee claimed the ultimate prize in 2009 when Ball Park took over the top spot in the category.

“The success of our partnership with The Cambridge Group has been unmistakable,” Schaillee said. “We're more confident than ever about the customers and products we focus on, and our sales data confirms the strength of our demand-driven approach.”

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