

# Flexibility to the fore

Field marketing agencies are having to adapt and streamline their operations in response to client demands for greater agency versatility in the face of ever-shorter lead times

When it comes to field marketing agency relationships, marketers have come to expect almost instantaneous reactions to their requests, not least because of a rise in the use of tactical projects to bring brand campaigns to life swiftly.

This growth in demand for activity within a short space of time is the product of the increasing number of brands occupying categories, according to Daniel Todaro, managing director of Gekko. 'Brands don't want to take a risk and commit early on; they want to see what everyone else is doing first,' he says.

The reaction of many field marketing agencies has been to offer greater flexibility, incorporating technology and information innovations, particularly handheld tools and EPOS data, to improve their offer to clients. But these agencies often have big teams of field staff – not exactly the most flexible element of an organisation. This inevitably means that some are failing to strike a balance. 'A lot of agencies are struggling to turn things around quickly,' adds Todaro.

He points to work Gekko has done for Apple as an example of the sort of speedy implementation that is often expected. The agency set up branded 'shops within shops', complete with

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Daniel Todaro  
Gekko

**Gekko: set up specialist Apple areas in 17 PC World stores with three-week lead time**

Apple staff, in 17 PC World stores. The purpose was to ensure Apple products were demonstrated and sold by an expert. However, Gekko was given only about three weeks' notice to recruit, train and put the employees in store. 'Everything was done very quickly and secretly. You have a matter of weeks rather than months to react,' he says.

Shorter lead times are being driven by brands often under pressure from retailers, according to Steve Radford, operations director at IMS. He adds that a couple of years ago the window for conducting a promotion was a week or two, but now he has clients who talk in terms of 'days, a day and even timeslots within a single day'.

Brands might want to be able to adapt faster, but they also need to think about their existing teams, warns Mike Hughes, managing director of CPM, whose clients include Mars. 'There is a danger that, where clients have big teams on the road, if they react too much they lose sight of what they originally appointed them for and won't achieve those objectives,' he says.

But any agency able to deliver flexible and responsive services and cultivate commercial relationships that are as



## Case study Oatibix

Weetabix outsourced its sales staff to Cosine in May 2006 to back the launch of its breakfast cereal Oatibix, an all-oats version of the classic wheat biscuit product. Weetabix previously ran an in-house field operation but wanted something more dynamic. It opted to work with Cosine because of the agency's use of handheld devices and data to drive activity.

'We needed to ensure there was compliance on shelf space and promotions and to know that retailers were aware of activity,' explains Weetabix sales director David Revell. 'To land anything, you need to make it happen in store and it doesn't happen by accident. It takes a lot of hard work at store level by the retailer, assisted by the manufacturer's field team.'

Traditionally, field staff would work to a journey plan and visit certain stores, whether that store needed them or not. It was, as Revell admits, a one-size-fits-all



approach. 'It was the only way we could manage the operation. Now, with the handheld technology and using data, we have a system where everyone can look

ahead and alter their plans accordingly if we need to make more calls in a certain retailer.'

Jacqui Sheldon, sales and marketing director at Cosine, was aware that it had to act fast. 'There is a lot more competition among new products. It's all about speed to market. If it's not selling quickly, it gets delisted quickly,' she says. 'Our tailored approach meant that we maximised every sales opportunity by retailer.'

Cosine used flexible support to sort availability issues in specific retailers during the launch phase. If there were any particular problems with a given retailer, the agency could increase the support it received.

The sales team boosted availability of the cereal in stores it worked with by 8.5%. More than 1.5m UK households bought Oatibix between May and September 2006.

hassle-free as possible will win more work. 'If clients want you to do everything flexibly, that puts demands on your operational effectiveness internally,' says Laurence Clube, commercial director at REL. 'The skill is being able to provide a customised service but to be as operationally simple and productive as you can.'

One way agencies can manage this is by intelligently using data such as EPOS figures to target resources. 'We're going to see a lower volume of work and fewer calls,' admits Gail Tunesi, managing director of PMI. 'We will have to be very flexible and end up with less business. But clients will benefit from a very efficient operation and their ROI will go through the roof.'

The use of technology through devices such as handheld terminals has helped in the collection of vast quantities of data, which savvy agencies and brands are using to create deeper insight as well as swifter reactions to identified trends. 'That data drives what our field teams do in stores,' says Tunesi. 'It's not about placing shelf labels, but about interrogating the whole supply chain to find the root cause of a problem.'

Outlets without such sophisticated data or the structure of the multiples can still offer sales opportunities, however. Alongside more flexible and tactical operations, there is a growing emphasis on sending out field staff in vans loaded with stock to visit independents, according to Tunesi. 'A lot of clients want to hit the impulse, convenience and independent sectors and get the immediate increase in distribution and sales,' she explains. 'Van sales is a way to do that. That is very attractive, whether you're launching a product, taking advantage of a seasonal uplift or just reacting to a competitor.'

GlaxoSmithKline has a significant contract team that calls on independent retailers. For its recent launch of Lucozade Sport Caffeine Boost, and to drive distribution of Lucozade Sport Raspberry, it asked PMI to use an extra tactical team to call on thousands of secondary independents with a three-week lead time. The team was trained, given a target of 15 calls a day and reported back daily with details such as the number of cases sold and strike rate, which were analysed. At the end of the drive, PMI convinced 52% of retailers to carry the promotions and increased distribution of both the Raspberry and Orange variants as well as establishing Caffeine Boost in the sector.

Mike Garnham, chief executive of MSF, is well aware of the 'Friday afternoon phone-call' syndrome, but claims that some



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Gail Tunesi  
PMI

## Data file Top 10 traditional agencies

Rank	Agency	Field marketing % of turnover	Total traditional (£)
1	Reach	94	33,113,380
2	REL Field Marketing	71	11,452,278
3	PMI	80	8,343,200
4	Cosine	58	6,090,000
5	Field Sales Solutions	96	5,640,757
6	Trinity Executives	100	5,331,239
7	ODM	85	5,270,000
8	GfK Field Marketing	100	3,188,000
9	Candour Event Marketing	71	3,132,363
10	The Network	26	2,406,040

FM figures incorporate revenue from selling, merchandising, auditing and training/communication. No CPM breakdown available. Excl Sarbanes-Oxley-affected agencies

agencies are walking away from such short-notice jobs because of the damage it can do to brand equity. However, he adds that where field marketing can react very quickly to something topical, brands can sometimes get bogged down in internal processes. 'The recent security alerts at UK airports would have been a great opportunity for guerrilla marketing,' he suggests.

The demand for flexibility might serve to shake up staff who have become accustomed to a regular routine, believes Nick Fennell, managing director of consultancy Archway Management. 'Agencies need to go where opportunity is and where problems are, but it is more difficult to manage,' he says. 'It is less efficient to go 10 miles out of your way to a store, but if the return on that is greater than going to the local ones, it pays.'

This summer's unusually wet weather is the perfect example of the sort of backdrop that keeps field marketers on their toes. 'We have had seasonal food drives that have been affected by it,' says Tunesi, who adds that because of floods in certain areas, crisis-management procedures have been introduced. 'If an entire region is flooded, people physically cannot get their job done. That means we rely even more on our ability to react.' The key for success in the industry it would seem is, as Tunesi suggests, to be ever-prepared for a change of approach to ensure the client's objectives are met.