

WHO'S PLAYED

Christmas can be an important time to win new customers, which means service, stock availability and a good shopper experience are all key. We asked field-marketing agency Gekko Partners to mystery-shop one of the festive season's busiest sectors – games consoles. **Liz Morrell** reports

Christmas may be finished for another year, but retailers will be busy over the next few weeks analysing how every part of their store experience – from customer service to product availability – has played a role in success over the vital festive trading period.

Improving the customer shopping experience during a stressed and busy time, when new customers may also be visiting, can mean the



Secret visit: mystery shoppers kept an eye out for availability, product knowledge and customer experience

difference between a post-Christmas profits warning and a glowing trading statement.

The Christmas market in 2005 proved to be as competitive as ever in the games console sector, and this product remained on the Christmas wish-lists of both children and adults alike.

Console connoisseurs

The release of a number of games, coupled with intense price competition also drove the market. Console prices dropped by about 20 per cent in the fourth quarter compared with the previous year.

According to figures released this month by the Entertainment and Leisure Software Publishers Association (ELSPA), the industry body for the computer and video games sector, a total of 4 million consoles – comprising Xbox, GameCube, PlayStation 2 and the original PlayStation – were sold last year. Many of them were bought in the pre-Christmas rush.

"The figure was almost exactly the same as last year. Given that no new consoles were released, we would have expected the figure to fall off rather than remain constant," says ELSPA director-general Roger Bennett.

Although there were no new console launches, the release of format variations – such as the limited-edition silver PlayStation 2 console – also boosted the market. Customers who may have already owned a PlayStation 2 fell for Sony's marketing ploy.

In its Christmas trading statement announced last week, Game revealed sales up 9 per cent for the five-week period that ended January 3. Like-for-like sales for the period rose 5.6 per cent.

High scores

According to ChartTrack figures quoted by the retailer, the installed base for this generation of hardware formats in the UK rose 60 per cent last year, to more than 10 million. Sony's PlayStation 2 has about 50 per cent of the market. However, when product is so generic and the competition in price so strong, the deciding factor for a customer can be the ease, or otherwise, of the store experience.

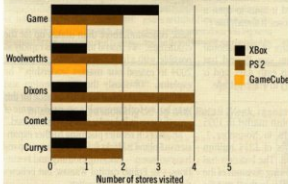
With this in mind, *Retail Week* asked field-marketing and mystery-shopping agency Gekko Partners to compare the shopping experience at five of the leading games console retailers.

In the week commencing December 15, the mystery shoppers were sent to Game, Woolworths, Dixons, Comet and Currys stores in Bradford, Croydon, Glasgow, Newbury and Birmingham.

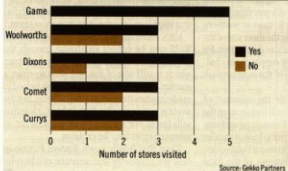
The ease of purchasing a games console as a gift in three of the most popular formats available – Xbox, PlayStation 2 and GameCube – was assessed by the shoppers. Recommendations are key if a shopper does not have a specific console in mind – meaning it is vital for staff to have a good knowledge of the product. Both Dixons and



1. WHICH CONSOLE WAS RECOMMENDED?



2. DID STAFF HAVE GOOD PRODUCT KNOWLEDGE?



A GOOD GAME?



Top entry: Game offered an all-round better shopping experience at the five stores visited

Comet were biased strongly towards the PlayStation 2, and joined Currys in making no recommendations for the GameCube. Staff at Game and Woolworths were less biased. Despite the competition, only a fifth of recommendations were based on price.

Mystery shoppers discovered that personal recommendations were rare. Instead, more than half of the recommendations were based on the best games available for the suggested console (graph 1).

So did the mystery shoppers trust the staff's recommendations?

Largely, yes. It was felt that product knowledge was best at Game and Dixons. However, Woolworths, Comet and Currys were less impressive (graph 2).

Of course, customers can make up their own minds by testing the game consoles themselves. However, the mystery shoppers were rarely offered demonstrations.

Dixons fared best, with staff offering demonstrations for the Xbox at two out of the five stores visited. However, four of the retailer's stores had demo units on display. Game and Currys staff offered demon-

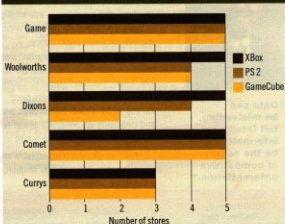
strations on all of the consoles, but at only one store each. Neither Woolworths nor Comet had demo units available for the Xbox and GameCube at any of their stores.

Having made the decision on which console to buy, a sale can be scuppered by poor availability. In this category, Game and Comet fared best. Both had each type of console in stock at all of the five stores. Currys had all

of the consoles available at only three of the stores, while Dixons — although good on availability for the Xbox and PlayStation 2 — had a poorer supply when it came to the GameCube (graph 3).

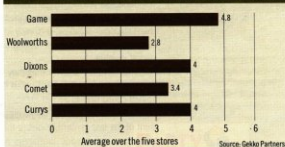
With availability, customer service and staff product knowledge making up the overall shopping experience, how did mystery shoppers rate each store? Market leader Game came out on top, with Dixons and Currys in joint second place. Wool-

3. WHICH CONSOLES WERE IN STOCK?



Source: Gekko Partners

4. RATE YOUR SHOPPING EXPERIENCE OUT OF 6



Source: Gekko Partners

worths — maybe because it is not a specialist retailer — was left trailing, with a rating of only 2.8 out of a possible 6 (graph 4).

So what is the overall conclusion? Game seems to be the obvious winner, but as market leader that is to be expected.

According to the diary of one of the mystery shoppers: "With the exception of Game, stores have such a wide variety of products to sell that they don't get adequate training on specific products. Unless they have personally used the product, they cannot give clear advice." The lessons will be learnt. ■

