

TECHNOFIELD ONE

The first is a four part series of features which analyses field marketing ability at the cutting edge and the tools that are being used to deliver it.

Field sales and merchandising has a tipping point, the point at which an extra salesperson and extra call, a further tick on the spreadsheet has the potential to overwhelm the brand - or at least to create a situation where potential brand rewards for the efforts undertaken are not fully realised. The flipside of this is that there is room for brands to squeeze extra results from their field activity by applying technology meaningfully.

Critical mass is a factor. Bigger sales teams clock up more miles making the saving from route planning software more compelling. Bigger brands collect more data from more product ranges allowing the cost of handheld technology to be spread. The locations for activity can be logically selected and rates for display and stand space can be negotiated. Staff payroll can be automated. There are many economies of scale that can be applied. There are certainly some FM agencies that have applied technology more than others.

Leading in Real-time

One agency that stands out for its technologically efficient outlook is Service Innovation Group an agency whose majority share holder is an entrepreneur whose leading enterprise is IT specialist SAP. The agency with German headquarters has been on the European acquisition trail through recent years confident that its proprietary web-based application Boost can leverage greater returns through innovation and that the increased scale of its European reach can be driven by Boost to make the whole enterprise more efficient rather than more unwieldy.

Chief process officer is Rudolf Schmidt. He told us, "Boost offers European clients two decisive benefits. Firstly, we, and our clients, use the same data, which facilitates an 'open book' approach in terms of operative information. Secondly, all those involved in the processes has customised access to the data and knowledge, any place, any time. This means that all users have access to the entire range of real-time reports, graphic illustrations (dashboards) and key performance indicators (KPIs) at all times, irrespective of their location.

We can incorporate all forms of mobile communication - mobile phones, MDAs or sub laptops - into this mutual database.

Schmidt is bullish about Boost calling it 'virtually impossible to surpass.'

"Each project we have launched with Boost has been met with enthusiasm from clients and employees alike, and has proved successful as a result," he says. "More than half our clients are now linked up to the internet to obtain their daily updates online, including downloads which they

subsequently process internally. In addition to sales projects in Portugal, Germany, France and Spain, Boost is being used with great success in projects for EDF and SKY."

Schmidt sees Boost as being a great cross border tool for European campaigning.

"Boost offers fascinating solutions for global management, providing access to identical information, amassed beyond country borders, at all times and in all places. It can be compared to sitting around the same virtual table at the same time with the same information."

"Our clients require a partner which can promise high-level performance and quality as standard across Europe - and deliver the goods. And this is precisely one of our strengths thanks to the group-wide use of Boost, supported by SAP and EDI interfaces with our clients."

The numbers Schmidt quotes appear to support this claim. "Today Boost is used by over 3,500 users in six European countries in the context of our projects," he comments.

A second company that has appreciated the value of real-time reporting is Matador Intelligence a data capture and reporting provider that was originally exclusive in UK field marketing to the FDS Group. The company has spent time recruiting FM agency staff in order to develop the right specialist skills for its launch into the broader agency scene a launch which it completed earlier this year. Matador has already worked with Reach and The Red Agency in addition to FDS.

We spoke to Paul Donaldson, senior operations manager, Matador Intelligence who spoke of the competitive advantage being gained by immediate access to information. "we provide a basket of joined up reporting/capture systems and services and because we continuously update our agency client's systems and capabilities to match the best we can ensure FM stays ahead of client brand own capabilities and expectations. Our 'Operational Intelligence' service is a step up from standard 'capture and reporting.' It means our clients are already offering their brand clients more in terms of productivity, analysis and market intelligence. They have moved beyond reports into the areas of 'calls to action', better analysis by the merging of results data with other information sources and automated management presentations." He is confident that this type of capability can extend the size of the total field marketing industry, "If FM can provide better operational intelligence than client brand own teams then new market demand for agencies will grow. Matador believe we help that happen."

Donaldson continues "We currently work with 13 client brands including UB, Kepak Foods, Northern Foods, Danone, IDL, Premier Foods, Totes Isotoner and the IGD.

We work in both the UK and Ireland. The operational intelligence needs in both markets differ greatly due to varying retail structures, promotional policies and various geographic factors but we have applied our services successfully to all our clients."

With so much potential on offer we asked Donaldson what data is currently in demand for capture? "Most demand is still in the classic areas of Availability, Distribution, Visibility/Space and Compliance. Client brands want to know if they are getting what they pay for and how they compare in the areas above against their competitors and against yesterday. We expect this to continue to be the case for the coming years. Clients want to get smarter at responding to and improving these core measures before they spend on new forms of data. They therefore want the same data but delivered in better and new ways."

These are some of the demands that Matador lists as a growing requirement for client brands:

- Instant visibility of reports
- Deeper analysis to support their decision making processes
- Consistency of data from their agents and their internal field teams
- Multimedia
- Instant alerts of problems
- Feed through of specific data directly to retailers and other channel partners
- Linking of results back to planning systems
- Competitor comparisons.

For agencies the following demands prevail

- Greater tracking and visibility of their field teams activities
- Quick fire capture for tactical teams
- Multimedia, primarily photographic

Donaldson elaborates, "Managers within client brands want summary views available immediately, formatted in such a way that they can drill down and make rapid decisions. They want action alerts if a measure falls outside of a set standard; they want these alerts instantly, directly from the field and directly to the person who can take action. They want a direct line to data capture in the field rather than data pre-handled by agents."

This data is being used to improve field productivity,