

What happened next in-store?

by David Harris

Being given business advice is one thing, but taking it is another. So just how did the convenience store operators who took part in our Partners in Action initiative earlier this year deal with the tips they got from business mentors?

The scheme, a joint campaign from Independent Retail News and Unilever's Partners for Growth unbiased category advice scheme, saw shops visited by mentors from the Partners for Growth Advisory Panel as well as an executive from Unilever itself. They provided each store with an analysis of how their business looked from an outside expert's viewpoint, along with a series of suggestions about how they could improve their business.

The stores were in both urban and rural locations and all seem to have taken the advice seriously, with the three we featured in early 2018 already taking several measures to follow the suggestions they received.

Really useful

Sarj Patel, who runs Pasture Lane Stores in the village of Sutton Bonnington in south-west Nottinghamshire, says the advice he got at the beginning of this year has proved really useful.

In sales terms, the suggestions he got for re-arranging the washing powders and laundry fixture in his 430sq ft shop have boosted that section's sales by 20%.

He says: "It was really helpful. They came up with a planogram for us and recommended what we should be stocking and the increase in sales clearly shows that it worked. I'm really pleased I took the advice."

It wasn't just the laundry section of the store that benefited. Patel was also advised to make greater use of social media to promote particular strengths of the shop. He used this to push the specialist gins he stocks and has been rewarded by customers who have seen the social media posts and headed to the store as a result.

Outside displays of flowers proved more problematic – he couldn't find a florist who



Sarj Patel:
"advice has really paid off"



ing down the middle, with secondary displays making the store even more "cramped", according to the mentors.

Sampat says: "We are going to have a refit which will address some of these issues. Like the other advice, this was useful."

Shot in the arm

Dilip and Fal Patel, who run Fal's Londis, in Clapham Park, London, fully realise that the area in which they run the shop is "a bit run-down" because there is evidence of this all around, with vacant shops easy to find.

In that sense then, they needed advice more than most, although through no fault of their own. That advice provided what Dilip Patel describes as a "shot in the arm" for the store, which might be all the more important in the area which it serves because so many other retailers have moved on.

Advice included getting an alcohol licence, which they are now pursuing, but other than that they were advised to stock fewer but better-selling lines in order to boost the bottom line.

Dilip Patel says: "We have tried to follow the advice by making the store more open and inviting. We are definitely also now thinking along the lines that less is more."

Sensible advice

Increasing the amount of food-to-go and impulse purchases was another tip from mentor Ramesh Shingadia and this advice has been taken too. Patel says: "We now have a little hot food, more sandwiches and ready snacks at good price-points. We will also shortly be looking at offering hot drinks."

But the pair remain realistic and say progress is likely to be steady rather than race away. Patel says: "The advice was sensible and we are taking it up, but we know there is no magic plan and we have to look at things across the store – from our chilled range to more space for hot drinks to alcohol. But it was very useful to get an expert view from outside to show us the best ways forward."

For more information and advice go to:
partnersforgrowth.unilever.com

Sponsor's comment



Amanda Quinton
Channel category
executive, Unilever

"We launched the Partners for Growth category programme 15 years ago to provide retailers with advice they could trust to be unbiased, so it works for them rather

than being skewed towards the interests of a particular manufacturer.

"With countless retailers all over the country having benefited from our advice over the years, it was no surprise to find that when surveyed, 95% of those using Partners for Growth told us they would recommend it to other retailers.

"For us, the Partners in Action initiative was all about showcasing

how our advice can really make a positive difference to a retailer's fortunes, so those retailers who haven't yet tried our advice can see just how beneficial it can be.

"We were initially impressed by how the three retailers – Sarj, Pratik and Dilip – embraced the visits and recommendations, and have been so pleased to see the positive impact the advice has had, despite the very

different challenges each store faced.

"We hope that after reading this, more retailers are inspired to try the Partners for Growth advice. Retailers can start immediately, simply by visiting our website and uploading a photograph of their fixture. In return, our category experts will provide a recommended planogram and personalised five-point action plan to help them improve sales."

could easily supply them – but he is using the outside space to promote the more practical virtues of compost for the garden. He has taken to selling three bags of compost for £10 and delivering them where needed, which he says has proved very popular.

Patel has also updated some of his signs, something else the advice highlighted, and given his shop a general spruce-up.

He adds: "We are in a rural village and it has just really helped letting people know what we can offer. In the end it's about providing good service and letting people know what you have."

Patel is also planning to build on events such as the existing "Bollywood night" that raises funds for local good causes.

Streamlined offer

Pratik Sampat, who runs a much less rural store near a busy commuter station in south-east London, found the advice he was given every bit as useful as his fellow shop-owner in the countryside.

Among the suggestions he has taken on board are to cut back on the number of toilettries being offered and consolidate a streamlined offer into a single unit – as opposed to the four previously used. Other suggestions Sampat took only partly. These included one to put a bigger display of fresh fruit and vegetables outside the shop.

He explains: "We thought about this and decided we would expand our fresh offering, but put it inside as opposed to outside. We thought we could look after it inside and that it was better from a hygiene point of view."

Perhaps the biggest step that Sampat is taking as a result of the visit from Partners in Action is to embark on a refit of the entire store to give it a fresher look, with a more structured and organised layout.

This is a practical response to the main recommendation of the mentors, which was to "open up" the store. They pointed out that the shop is long and thin but has a wider area at the front. This wider area is a good feature but is made to appear smaller by shelv-