

Opening up to new possibilities

by David Shrimpton

 Pratik Sampat's small convenience store sits just yards from the entrance to a busy commuter station in south-east London. As such, it enjoys fantastic passing trade, as well as drawing in regular custom from the 3,000 or so 'chimney pots' in the local area. "I would give my right arm to have a shop that close to a station," says fellow retailer Dean Holborn, who is visiting the store as part of the ongoing Partners in Action initiative being run by Independent Retail News in association with Partners for Growth, the unbiased category improvement scheme from manufacturer Unilever.

Basket shoppers

Despite its location, Sampat admits the 800sq ft Premier Express store is not realising its full potential, even though it is turning over a comfortable £15,000 a week. A big chunk of those sales (about 40%) come from alcohol and the shop boasts an extensive range of beers, wines and spirits, including premium wines and craft beers.

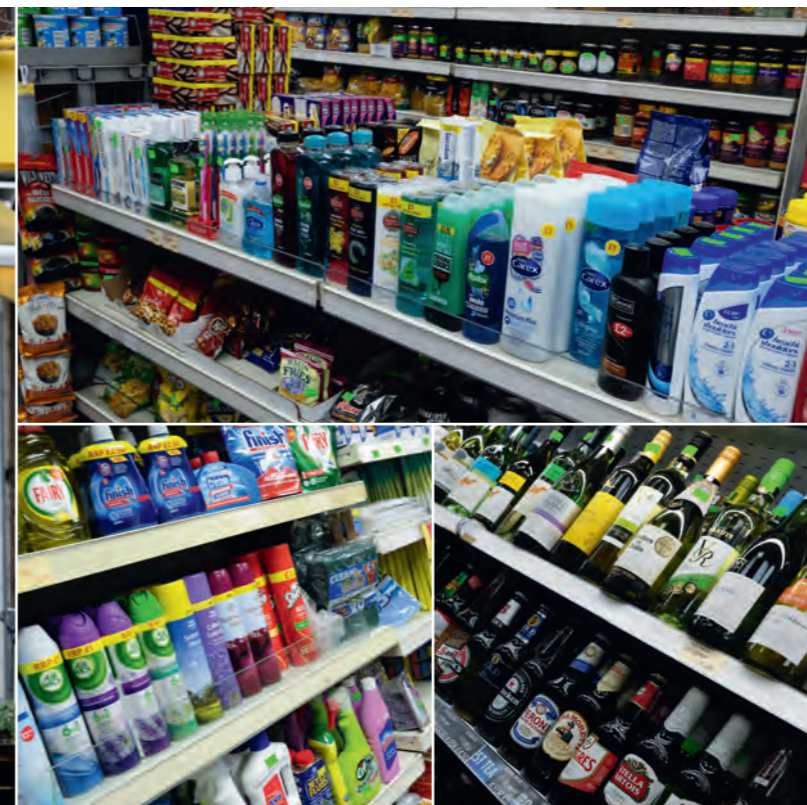
But Sampat concedes that, in the store as a whole, things have become a bit stale and no longer necessarily meet the requirements of residents in an area (Sydenham and Penge) that has become increasingly affluent since he took over the shop six years ago. "We used to get people coming in and filling up baskets during the day, but not any more," he says.

Shop window

The first recommendation from Holborn and fellow mentor Kay Patel is to smarten up the frontage in order to communicate the message to passers-by that the store is likely to stock what they need. Sampat currently displays half a dozen plastic crates of fresh produce out front, but the mentors' suggestions included spending £500 on a purpose-built display and initial stock to kick-start a more comprehensive fresh offer. "If [customers] see the fresh produce, they are more likely to carry on inside," Holborn says.



Pratik Sampat:
Owner, Premier Express, Sydenham,
with mentors Dean Holborn and Kay Patel



Household, laundry and toiletries



Amanda Quinton, channel category executive at Unilever, provided these recommendations to help Sampat improve his toiletries and household categories:

1. Toiletries are currently ranged across four adjacent shelves near the till area close to the front of the store, along the top of the middle run of shelving. The recommendation was to move the fixture and consolidate into a single unit – although this could still be close to the till to deter theft. "Look at relocating toiletries to another area, to a more logical adjacency that matches shopper expectations when they're searching out the category," Quinton said.
2. The second suggestion was to merchandise the category vertically. "Shoppers tend not to shop well when fixtures are merchandised horizontally," she said. Once the fixture has been relocated, Sampat can follow the appropriate Partners for Growth planograms found on partnersforgrowth.unilever.com.
3. He should also reduce the number of lines, such as listing only one hair gel option instead of two and cutting down on the unnecessarily wide range of shampoos. This would have the added advantage of releasing cash tied up in stock.
4. The household cleaners fixture occupies a whole bay of six shelves towards the rear of the store and again there is an opportunity to

remove duplicated lines and replace them with breadth of range, adding in some key SKUs to cover a broader spectrum of shopper needs.

6. This fixture could also be consolidated, with pest control products moved into the adjacent bay and replaced with cleaning wipes, a popular and convenient option that can drive incremental sales within the category.

7. Household cleaners should be merchandised by room type. "Tidying up the fixture will help shoppers find what they are looking for," Quinton said.

8. The laundry section could be brought next to household cleaners to create a more logical adjacency. More focus should be placed on capsules and liquids as opposed to washing powders.

Patel cautions that Sampat will have to be prepared for considerable wastage. "In one of my stores," he says, "I allow up to 50% wastage on fresh, because as long as I can cover my costs, it's still bringing people in." Further suggestions for the front of store include fresh flowers, new LED lighting to highlight the offer and even a change of signage to give a more premium feel. This could involve a solution such as upgrading to Booker's new, grey Premier fascia. "At the moment, he's not selling his offering," says Holborn.

Store layout

The main recommendation from the mentors, however, involved the layout of the inside of the store, which is long and thin but has a wider area at the front, dominated by the alcohol offer along the left-hand wall. This wider area is made cramped by the fact it has a run of shelving down the middle, with a gondola end at the front creating a pinch-point for customers. Several branded fridges and two old, bulky Walkers stands on the other end

of the run only add to the clutter.

Patel and Holborn advised "opening up" the store by removing the middle run and add-on units, which would allow shoppers to step back and get a better view of the products on offer. "The parasite units have become parasites!" Patel said. "He needs to take all of them out. The store is far too cramped and some of those secondary displays are very tired. Take it out and use that space to help people navigate the store better."

Building work

Another way forward would be to open up the back of the store even more by removing the small wall that breaks up the space half way in – but this would involve spending tens of thousands of pounds on building work and shutting the store for four weeks, according to Sampat.

The mentors also suggested the store be arranged to tap into key shopper missions for the store, which were identified as 'big night in', 'meal for tonight' and 'breakfast on-the-go', as well as the gifting occasion.

Further suggestions in-store included drastically cutting down the range by concentrating on the best sellers, and introducing fresh meat to encourage bigger basket shops than the current average spend of £5.50.

Reasons to visit

Stocking more on-trend products such as protein shakes and snacks, premium gins and £1 bags of confectionery could help boost sales and margins, while installing a small ramp outside would make the shop more accessible to elderly customers and mums with push-chairs especially.

Holborn strongly recommended a small bake-off operation producing fresh bread and morning goods, while another option is for Sampat to add a Post Office to the newsagents he owns two doors down, creating another compelling reason for consumers to visit the small parade of shops on which the store is located.

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