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Promotional games can be a powerful friend to today's marketer — or a deadly enemy if mishandled. John Donovan picks his way carefully through a potential minefield

LEARNING THE RIGHT RULES OF THE GAME



Donovan: Disaster games can cause enormous damage to an image

Games are one of the most powerful promotional weapons available.

But when they make headlines, it is not always good news — as the Mirror Group, Esso, Asda and Cadbury Typhoo found to their cost recently when their games had to be curtailed or withdrawn. The media take a disproportionate interest in such disasters, often giving them front-page coverage to the exclusion of more important events.

It is still not clear what went wrong with Esso's Noughts & Crosses game, but reports indicate that too many prizes, big and small, were claimed in the first days of the launch, and a printer's error is thought to be responsible. The AsdaCash game seemed to have a flaw on the Cashcards, and syndicates of competitors "broke" the Typhoo Cashpot game.

The immediate cost of getting a game wrong can run into millions, but the damage done can be even greater in the long term. A disaster game can cause enormous harm to a brand by tarnishing an image that may have been carefully and expensively built up over many years. In some cases further damage can be done if, for example, claims have to be deferred because of litigation with the game's suppliers.

The mistakes made in the past ten years in some disaster games are astonishing to a games specialist. For example, there was the quiz game with no game variations, so competitors only had to remove the scratch-off material from one game piece to be able to answer all the questions on the next.

The Mirror was acutely embarrassed when it published an incorrect combination of "called numbers" for its bingo-type game, resulting in a long queue outside its offices one Saturday morning, with thousands thinking they had won a big prize.

Don Marketing's file is full of such stories, and nearly always the chief cause is a lack of expertise in a complex matter. After decades of experience, marketers in the US would not dream of relying solely on advertising or promotional agencies to run a promotional game, as happens in the UK. Instead they or their agencies brief one of the several specialist games companies.

Most disaster games are the result of inexperience and a failure to recognise the important distinction between the specialist printing needed for game pieces and the printing needed for ordinary promotional material. Indeed producing game pieces often needs tighter security than printing currency, because higher denominations are involved.

The security of printing game pieces includes the need to avoid printing too many winners, misregistration and variations in colour and size. See-through and other flaws can result in "winner pick-out" ▶



Headlines: The media are not slow to pounce when a promotional game turns into an embarrassing disaster

— that is, the identification of winners at any stage before distribution to consumers. See-through can also enable people to get skill and probability games right every time.

Many other pitfalls must be avoided. Security has to be a priority at all stages, from the moment the game is created to when the prizes are paid. Taking all these requirements into account, it is often unfair of a promoting company to put the burden of responsibility solely on the print buyer, who is rarely experienced in this specialised work.

It is crucial for the company to be aware of all the potential hazards right from the start. For instance, it is important to know how many outlets there will be and the maximum number of game pieces to be stocked at any one outlet. These figures determine the number of game variations necessary to avoid a breach in the game's security.

Another vital matter is whether the game will be legal. For example, a game that is deemed to be illegal can result in criminal charges under the Lotteries Act being brought against the directors of the game promoter.

Another requirement is that consumers must be able to understand easily how to play the game. So the game mechanic and play instructions must be unambiguous. The game mechanic must also be checked to make sure that it does not breach a patent application or a patent that has been granted. Several game techniques are protected in this way in several countries, such as Don Marketing's Match the Experts. Even the proposed name for the game should be checked to ensure that it does not

infringe a trademark or copyright. Shell's Mastermind game was approved by the owners of that name, whereas a national newspaper that tried to use Mastermind in its promotion was prevented from doing so at a late and embarrassing stage.

There is a new phenomenon that also has to be considered, particularly in skill games. This is the emergence of professional competitors, syndicates and bureaux in the past two years or so. Many of their names are on Don Marketing's computer files and they operate in most parts of the country.

Some even advertise in specialist competitors' magazines, saying that they will buy used game pieces.

This enables them to build up a "library" of the variations of a game so that they can break it. They then advertise that, for £5 and an unused game piece with the person's name and address written in the appropriate place, they will turn it into a winner and post it to the claims address. There have also been attempts to use computers to break games.

With such people watching for their chance, great care must be taken with skill games to ensure that game breakers are restrained and their influence minimised. This can be done by using hi-tech printing to produce millions of variations, with built-in security.

A specialist games company can often save a lot of money on printing by structuring the game mechanic and rules so that it is possible to use conventional printing.

For one big game recently, in which every game piece was a potential winner — the most tempting challenge to a would-be game breaker — it was possible to save the

client nearly £500,000 on the print costs, which was used to boost prizes and the promotion's appeal.

The main objective must nevertheless be to ensure that the effort is not worth the reward for any game breaker and this should always be remembered when a game is being developed. For this reason the use of sophisticated printers may be unavoidable. The more advanced offer ink-jet, computer-controlled, hidden imaging, which can generate millions of different game combinations printed on foil-coated stock which cannot be penetrated.

Promotional games are popular because they let consumers know immediately whether they have won and so have an advantage over traditional competitions which most people consider boring and not worth the trouble of entering. Many games have had spectacular results — for instance the Shell Make Money game in 1984, which is claimed to have lifted sales by more than 25 per cent, and the Great Guinness Challenge, said to have boosted sales of draught Guinness by 30 per cent at a time when the brand was not even advertised on TV.

However, the division between success and disaster can be fine. British marketers who want the advantages of promotional games but not the risks to their brand or perhaps even their own jobs should therefore insist on using a specialist games company with a good track record. Similarly the wise executive in either a sales promotion consultancy or an ad agency should think twice before risking his and his client's reputation — and profits. □

John Donovan is chairman of Don Marketing