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How CPG brands can take their products from inception to in-store

Article

Launching a new consumer packaged goods (CPG) brand in the current retail landscape is no easy feat. Consumers are less brand loyal, more cost-conscious, and expect brands to be present in a variety of digital and physical channels.

In a recent Tech Talk webinar, John Pawlowski, vice president of marketing at pet food company Heckova!, shared four steps to build a successful CPG brand and get it on to retail shelves.

1. Find the opportunity

Pawlowski worked in CPG brand management for about 10 years when a colleague suggested he switch from human food to pet food. Pawlowski recognized the growth potential of the pet food space and decided it was time to start his own pet food business.

- First, he had to figure out where his brand would fit amongst already established players.
- Pawlowski divided pet brands into three buckets: those that treat dogs like patients, listing health benefits and ingredients; those that treat dogs "like a wolf," leaning into more natural diets; and those that treat dogs like they're a part of consumers' families.

Drawing on characteristics from all three, Pawlowski landed on a playful tone celebrating each dog's unique traits and calling out the nutritional benefits of Heckova! products without feeling too clinical.

2. Use data to adjust and validate

Once the foundation of the brand—the look, the feel, what products it would offer—was established, the next step was putting it in front of consumers, which meant developing an ecommerce website.

- "First [we focused on] the website, trying to build some credibility with consumers and fill some orders," said Pawlowski.
- As orders came in, Heckova! used that data to better refine its brand strategy, learning what, how much, and where consumers were buying.

Heckova! Also conducted focus groups to understand how the brand resonated with different demographics to identify the best way to move into physical retail.

"We realized the younger demographic were really embracing [the brand]," said Pawlowski. "So we [asked ourselves], 'How do we find retail partners that can help us navigate that target audience?'"

3. Take a targeted approach to physical retail

It can be more fruitful for brands to court one or two major retailers that they want to work with rather than go after too many at once.

For Heckova!, the dream company was Costco, said Pawlowski. But it wasn't an easy sell.

- "It was going to be a real homerun swing. We knew it was asking a lot, but in a limited-SKU environment like a club retailer, you can actually get in and sell some products," he said.
- Through his network, Pawlowski contacted a Costco buyer in the Texas region and secured a rotation in one of the retailer's stores. The retention was successful enough that Heckova! scored another rotation this summer.

4. Do your research

After Costco, Heckova! went back to the data to determine where to go next.

- "When we think of crossovers, we know our customers are shoppers at Costco. And where else do they look? They go to Target," said Pawlowski.
- "As the rotation ended at Costco, we had a whole new community of consumers saying "Hey, I like this product. And we heard from a number of them saying that [Heckova!] feels like a very 'Target' product."

Knowing this was another big swing, Heckova! perfected its pitch.

- One of Heckova's key hires was a former buyer for Target, who was able to give insights into how Target partnered with CPG brands.
- Heckova! also did its research, delving into Target's documented processes. "We read their 80-page PDF and said, "We've got to take this seriously. This is gospel and we've got to learn it and do it right,'" said Pawlowski.

This preparation helped Heckova! score a spot on Target.com about two months ago with a handful of SKUs.

Watch the full webinar.

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