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May 12, 2008 12:00 PM, By AMANDA BALTAZAR

Long-lasting, exotic flavors and functional benefits such as teeth whitening have consumers chewing more gum



The gum category hasn't lost its flavor.

Improved packaging, functional benefits and taste innovations are helping the chewable treat pop out to shoppers in the candy aisle.

“It's difficult to grow sales in a mature market, so manufacturers need a great deal of innovation,” acknowledged David Morris, research director of food and beverage for Mintel International, Chicago.

Suppliers' gumption is paying off.

Sales of gum rose 10.2% during the 52 weeks ending March 23, amid declining sales of mint and breath fresheners, which dropped 2.6% and 10%, respectively, according to Information Resources Inc.

“It makes sense for consumers to gravitate [to gum] if there is no loss of flavor,” said Morris.

Sales of sugarless gum are proving to be especially sweet. Items in the subcategory stretched their sales 15.6% during the same time period, while sugar-containing varieties grew 8.1%.

At Marsh Supermarkets, mints constitute just 6% of confectionary sales, while more than one in five (22%) items purchased in the candy aisle is gum, noted Connie Gardner, spokeswoman for the Indianapolis-based chain.

Strong mint flavors remain the biggest sellers at Stauffers of Kissel Hill, Lititz, Pa., said Warren Crills,

grocery buyer.

When he runs monthlong price reductions of 50 cents off, sales are increased by around 5%, Crills said. The retailer's gum sales have also recently been boosted by the introduction of Wrigley's 5 gum, as well as by pocket-friendly flat packs of different varieties.


“It's easy, convenient, it doesn't take up much room, and it keeps the gum fresh and tasting good,” he said.

Indeed, Wrigley's 5 and Stride from Cadbury Adams, which was launched two years ago, are driving the category right now, said Raymond Jones, managing director at Dechert-Hampe, a marketing consulting firm based in Northbrook, Ill.

Three flavors of 5 — Flare (cinnamon), Cobalt (peppermint) and Rain (spearmint) — were launched last spring to reinvigorate the stick gum category with a striking style of packaging.

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Stride hit the market in 2006 with the tagline “The Ridiculously Long Lasting Gum.” It's available in seven flavors, including Spearmint, Sweet Berry and, the latest to be launched, Always Mandarin.

Stauffers of Kissel Hill will really give customers something to chew on when it introduces new shelf fixtures above its checkout belts next month, and incorporates them in the design of a new store that's set to open in September in Rohrerstown, Pa.

“I'm just making an effort to get [gum] in customers' faces, because once they've got things on the belt they never look behind at the racks,” said Crills. “And anything below the knee doesn't sell.”

These new 4-foot-long, 8-inch-wide shelving fixtures simply slot into the cashstand, he explained. They will be used to hold gum and mints only, while other candy will remain in the regular check-stand racks.

Wrigley provided the shelving units, which also come in a wire rack version.

“But I like the shelving better, because it's neat, clean and there's no wire,” said Crills. “I'm anticipating that we'll get a really good response from this. I don't think many people have gum on their shopping list, but if you put it in front of them, it will sell.”

According to Mintel's Morris, “The checkout is the natural place to put gum, and having it top of mind is the way to go, because it's such an impulse purchase.”

Jim Corcoran, spokesman for the National Confectioners Association, agreed, but noted that self-checkouts make this more challenging, because shoppers are busy and their eyes don't wander to the gum shelves.

Retailers are, however, capturing the attention of shoppers with unique flavors.

Young adult consumers tend to prefer exotic flavors of gum such as the Island Cooler or Berry Pearadise varieties of Wrigley's Extra Fruit Sensations line, said Marion Beeler, candy buyer at Jungle Jim's International Market, Fairfield, Ohio. She added that Baby Boomers stick with the tried-and-true minty flavors of sugar-free gum, and younger kids love the new Wrigley 5 products.

Beeler has allocated promotional space in front of the main checkout area to gum. Category sales do jump when she features it there, she said. And when it's moved, she often finds customers looking for the products they tried.

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Akron, Ohio-based West Point Market sells mostly imported gum from Australia, the U.K. and Switzerland, according to Rick Vernon, chief executive officer. These typically come in flavors such as mint, eucalyptus and licorice.

“They're potent like an Altoid,” he said. “Most of our customers travel a lot and are looking for something different, something new.”

Minty gum and recognizable fruit flavors sell best at Harvest Market, Fort Bragg, Calif., said Yvonne Galliani, store manager.

Gum sells itself at Harvest Market, said Galliani, so she never features it in sales circulars. However, if a manufacturer told her of an exciting new product and what it does, or tastes like, she would.

Although Galliani did source an Asian green tea brand, it wasn't successful because the flavor didn't last long, so she pulled it from the shelves.

Food Lion also tries to keep its gum selection fresh.

“We keep up with gum trends by constantly changing out flavors, sizes and packaging,” said Susan McDonald, category analyst for general merchandise and seasonal candy at Food Lion. “We often are first to market with new innovative gum items and offer shippers in the front aisle locations for customer convenience.”

The retailer also merchandises gum at the checkouts, in the candy aisle, on four-sided racks near the registers and on the cough/cold/candy tower.

Trends in the gum category mirror what's happening in the beverage industry, noted Dechert-Hampe's Jones. So it's no surprise that functional varieties of gum are garnering attention.

Mintel research reveals that 36% of consumers have tried gum that whitens teeth and would try it again, and 38% have not tried it but would like to.

Similarly, 24% of consumers have chewed gum that kills germs, while 50% have not, but would like to. Also, gum that promises an energy boost is having success with younger consumers, added Morris.

Japanese consumers, too, are very receptive to functional gum, noted Corcoran. They use it as a snack


replacement and to deliver healthy ingredients such as ginseng.

Although Baby Boomers are part of an age group that typically shies away from gum because of crowns and dentures, this could be a great group to capture with functional products, said Morris.

And there is potential to expand the functional gum category to include offerings that help relieve symptoms associated with everything from premenstrual syndrome to motion sickness.

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