

Vendor think tank examines new ways to make their brands stars

CHICAGO — At a time when consumer takeaway is low and financial resources are limited, retailers and suppliers need to dig beneath the surface to find creative ways to grow sales; it's about exploring your hidden assets. And it was a key takeaway of a recent Elevation Forum meeting, held here last month.

Dan Mack, founder of the Elevation Forum, told attendees to focus on the needs of retailers and consumers.

"It's not about what YOU make — it's about what THEY want," said Dan Mack, The Swanson Group's EVP strategic business development and founder of the Elevation Forum. "Many organizations spend too much time looking inward at their own capabilities, goals, corporate metrics and opinions, and not enough time looking outward at the changing needs of their retailer partners and the consumer."

In all, roughly 20 different companies attend a typical Elevation Forum — a think tank that brings together executives from noncompeting companies to examine the opportunities to better align their brands with the broader goals of retailers. Discussion

at the Oct. 7 meeting centered on improving in-store shopper marketing practices and learning how to win "winner-take-all" negotiations.

Winning on both fronts requires a laser focus on the things you are and the qualities your brand brings to the consumer. "The winning companies are the firms that explore their inner 'we-ness,'" said Bruce Kramer, VP sales and marketing for Wahl Home Products.

One key issue most vendors in the group seemed to agree upon was the incredibly short window that retailers seem to allow for new products to meet critical sales thresholds.

Another area of agreement focused on the escalating costs associated with bringing a new product to market, particularly for smaller and mid-sized companies that may not get a chance to start all over again if the launch goes wrong.

As for the battle for the consumer: That often can be won at the store level, explained Swanson Group principal Rich Swanson. "Shopper marketing also includes creating impactful, special packaging or added-value



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incentives.... Research shows a consumer is more willing to buy a product when [he or she] can see the brand within the package. Transform the package so the product is the star, not just your packaging and positioning," Swanson said.