



# Games people play

**Promotional games can go badly wrong. Brian Oliver reports on those who play with fire — and win**

In recent years, the sales promotion industry's interest in promotional games has been rekindled by the forecourt promotions war between major petrol companies, and fuelled by Fleet Street circulation battles and fierce competition in the drinks and confectionery markets. But a recent spate of game promotion disasters — mostly involving games devised in-house by sales promotion agencies or specialist printers — has prompted some client companies to consider whether promotional games should instead be treated as the exclusive domain of specialist games companies.

At the same time, the fear of a game going disastrously wrong has prompted some brands to consider whether the benefits of such promotions are outweighed by the potential risk involved. The scale of many game promotions means that the smallest mistake in the design or production of the game — or a lapse in security at any stage — can prove costly and highly embarrassing if the game has to be withdrawn.

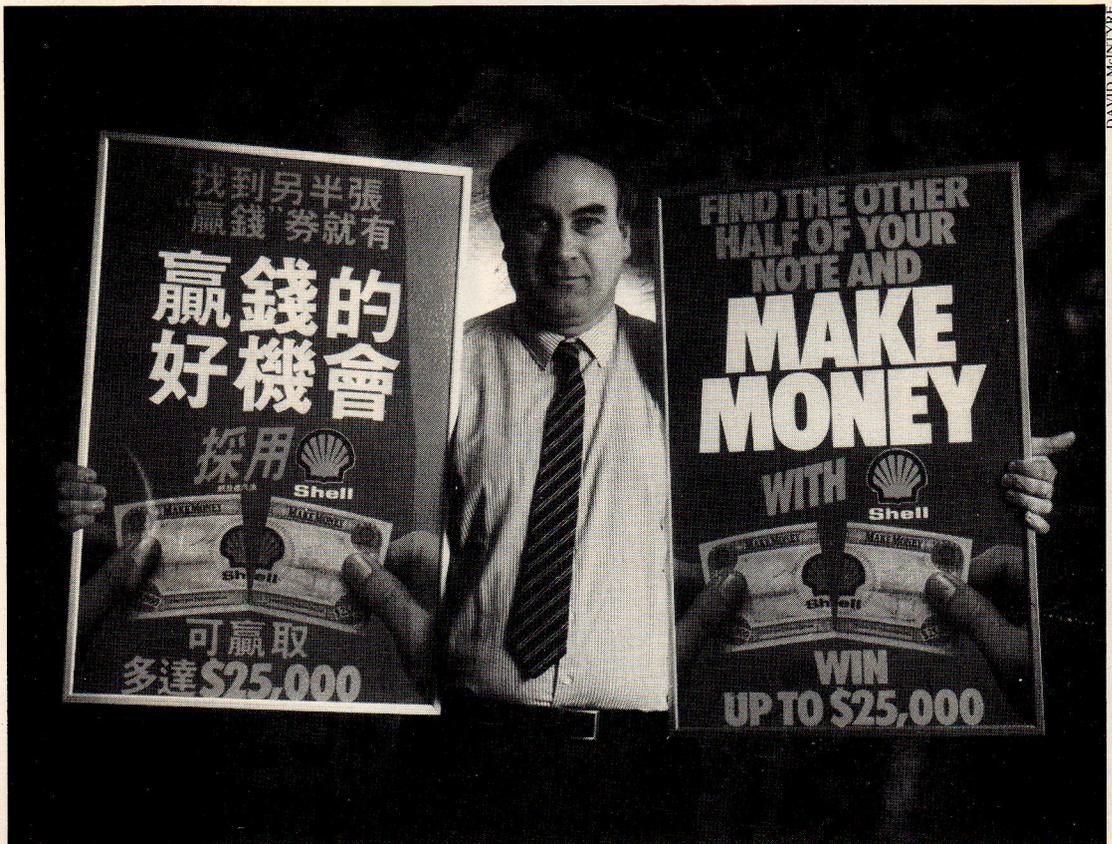
Several months ago, Beatrice Foods was forced to end a major promotional game in the US after it discovered that the game did not contain sufficient variations. The company found itself facing claims amounting to more than \$16m only a few days after the game was launched.

## Game cancelled

In the UK, the Noughts and Crosses game launched last year by Esso had to be cancelled and all stocks of the game withdrawn from participating outlets because of a printing error. The game was designed to produce only a couple of winners of the top cash prize of £100,000. Instead, Esso received more than 20 claims for the £100,000 prize in the first few days.

Promotional games specialist John Donovan claims that such disasters could have been avoided if a specialist games company had been involved: 'We would have used our expertise to avert the problems that arose,' he says. 'After all, we live with promotional games every day. We don't do anything else.'

Colin Linn, chairman and managing director of games specialist Norton and Wright, part of the Norton-Opax Group, believes that promoters should seek the help of both games experts and legal advisers before launching a game promotion. He argues that the design of a promotional game



Donovan: 'Each new games disaster really worries the major brands'

should be the preserve of games specialists, and points to the structure of the prize fund as just one element that should be handled by experts. It involves establishing the ratio of prizes to the game universe and requires some fairly complex computations. 'It is a minefield for people who don't understand it,' he says.

Linn believes that avoiding potential pitfalls is not just a matter of having the appropriate knowledge. 'It is the experience of having run many game promotions over a wide spectrum of areas that is important,' he says.

According to Linn, promotional games can run into problems when promoters try to reduce costs by cutting corners: 'They may use poor quality materials or production methods which mean the games are not particularly secure,' he says.

Not surprisingly, however, leading sales promotion consultancies do not accept that game promotions should be only handled by specialist games companies: 'The creative execution and the working out of traffic building or loyalty mechanics is very much the preserve of the sales promotion agency,' says Chris Satterthwaite, a director of sales promotion consultancy International Marketing and Promotions, which has handled major promotional games for clients such as Texaco and Allied Breweries.

Satterthwaite doubts whether specialist games houses have sufficient 'marketing understanding

and creative flair' to be able to produce a game that will tie in with a client's marketing objectives and the long-term strategy of the brand.

But he also warns: 'Sales promotion agencies should not dabble in games unless they have a real understanding of how they work, otherwise they could give a client bad advice. Unless they are aware of the risks involved, fundamental errors can be made in the structuring or production of a game.'

Nick Gale, chairman of Cato Johnson UK, which has run game promotions for major brands like Schweppes, agrees: 'Whether or not a consultancy should handle game promotions in-house really depends on its level of expertise in this field. If it does not have the necessary expertise, problems could arise.'

## In-house work

Promotional Campaigns has shown that sales promotion consultancies can be highly successful when it comes to developing game promotions in-house. Earlier this year, it won an ISP Gold Ward for its Motor Mania game for Marlboro. Other current game promotions devised by the agency include BP's Dynasty Dollars and the Classic Collection game for the Raffles cigarette brand.

Chairman and creative director Keith Bantick points out: 'A promotions consultancy works very closely with a client and it can take six months, or even longer, to become completely familiar with a brand's

positioning and the constraints that imposes. A games company that comes in cold for a two to three-month project cannot possibly build the required 'brand values' into a promotional game. 'We create the mechanics and the creative communication with a very clear objective, which can help to enhance the image perception of the brand.'

Gale agrees. 'Many games involve the use of incentive based consumer messages in conjunction with games technology and the creative presentation of the brand. Balancing a game's play value with the action you are asking consumers to take requires an element of motivation psychology. Games companies or specialist printers don't have the ability to tie in this kind of game planning with commercial and brand image objectives.'

According to Gale, a sales promotion agency should be able to assume responsibility for managing the many different facets of a game promotion. This involves overseeing the marriage of printing technology, response analysis and win factors as well as ensuring the legality of the game, complying with codes of conduct, arranging insurance indemnities and advising the client on essential supplier services, such as security printing.

'It is also important to ensure that the manner in which the game is designed and communicated protects clients' interests in their dealings with consumers,' Gale adds.



Satterthwaite: 'Fundamental errors can be made in structuring the game'

Donovan admits that 'the safest route' is for sales promotion consultancies and games specialists to work side by side on a game promotion, and Linn agrees: 'The most successful games are those which involve a client who totally understands what he wants the game to do, a sales promotion consultancy with the ability to translate that objective into a creative idea and a promotional production company that can construct the most suitable game pattern and game design.'

Many leading consultancies say they often take advantage of the expertise offered by specialists such as security printers and computer companies. 'Game companies have a lot of expertise on the mechanical side and it is in our interests to tap that from time to time,' says Bantick.

### Avoid disasters

Avoiding disasters by using specialists where necessary is important for all the businesses involved. As Donovan points out, each new game disaster causes a ripple through the sales promotion industry. 'It pushes up the cost of premiums for game insurance and it really worries the major brands. Some of them are no longer open to promotional games, because they are so concerned that something might go wrong.'

Shell UK, perhaps the biggest user of games, says it always uses a specialist games house to ensure

maximum safety. 'The scale of our games promotions means that mistakes can be very expensive,' says sales development manager Ken Danson. 'We develop the concept of the games ourselves and then bring in a specialist company, because it has the appropriate skills in terms of mechanics and redemption.' All its recent games have involved Don Marketing.

Martin Davis, competitions administration manager for Express Newspapers, makes a similar point. 'We use a specialist company chiefly to ensure that a game is legal. Sometimes we take an idea to game experts and ask them to produce it; on other occasions, they may come to us with ideas. Either way, it is important to tread carefully.'

Tony Barton, product group manager at Bass, is aware that promotional games can easily 'get out of hand'. As a result, his company has always used a specialist games company. 'You need someone who can provide security from the outset and ensure that the materials being used are not sub-standard.'

Barton feels that, whether a client company opts to use a games specialist or a sales promotion consultancy, the final decision should not be based on price alone: 'It is essential to check out the track record of the companies concerned and not be swayed by the lowest quote. In the long-run, it could be a false economy.' □

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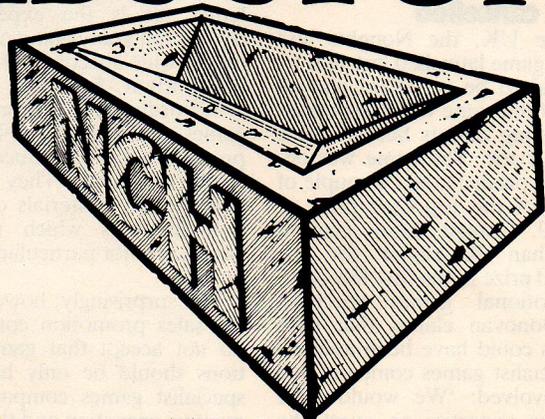
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*Karen Koessler*

For the who's who and the what's where in Sales Promotion account handling, contact me at The Macmillan Davies Group, Kingsbourne House, 229/231 High Holborn, London WC1V 7DA. Tel: 01-242 6633.

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