

Direct pressure: First aid manufacturers use customer insights, e-commerce to their advantage

By David Salazar - 08/26/2019

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It is steady as it goes for the first aid category. While other categories experience more extreme fluctuations, a steady demand for merchandise and a constant

influx of product introductions have resulted in relatively stable sales for this important department at retail.

The overall first aid treatment segment, which includes insect first aid, ointments, anti-itch treatments and smelling salts sat at roughly \$1.5 billion for the year ended June 6 — a year-over-year decline of 0.1% in terms of sales, according to IRI data. Subcategories also are more or less steady — ointments for the same period brought in \$915 million (a 1% decrease) and bandages were up 1.2% to \$845 million. The exception was insect first aid, which declined 9.6% to \$14.3 million.

Even with the stability of the category, industry observers said that opportunities abound in first aid, especially with aging baby boomers needing more products and a dramatic shift to self-care that drives patients into retailers seeking solutions to minor ailments.

Then there is the fact that as retailers are having to make tough decisions about which products they should allot space to, consumers are becoming increasingly choosy.

“I think retailers are always looking at their assortments and asking if they have the most effective remedies,” said Jim Creagan, president of Randob Labs, which makes Sting-Kill insect bite first aid products. “And consumers are looking at it from the perspective of looking not just at the name brand, but at the active ingredients.”

The big buoy in the category, though, is the fact that 40% of purchases in the space are distress trips, Meghan Kelly, senior brand manager for U.S. wound care at Johnson & Johnson Consumer, said. That immediacy is something that manufacturers in the category get excited about, as much for the foot traffic it drives into stores as for the sales it drives for their products and the ability to be a go-to brand for consumers, Creagan said.

“It’s about convenience, but it’s about more than convenience,” he said. “It’s about the ability to say, ‘I need a solution to my problem and use it now,’ and retailers can use that as an advantage to think about as they make their stocking decisions.”

Beyond delivering on products when the need is high, category experts said the potential for the category is there as long as retailers and can effectively can inform consumers about their first aid options, while also leveraging e-commerce and an omnichannel approach to augment in-store sales.

In-store education is vital, many said. Consumers come to retailer stores needing answers, and they will develop a loyalty to the merchants who can point them to the right product for the right problem. Assortment also means a lot to this category, with many vendors suggesting that retailers work with them to ensure that all their bases are covered across the wide spectrum of first aid products.

Knowing what works

Kelly said that J&J’s approach to first aid, as with other categories, often is powered by consumer insights. One of the things the company has gleaned is that fully half of first aid consumers said they do not feel prepared to treat a wound, which presents a big opportunity for education.

“Education around preparedness is where we see the biggest opportunity to both serve the consumer and the retailer,” she said. “What we’ve done to help drive the preparedness message is drive deep consumer insight on how we can help them better shop this category and make them feel more prepared, knowing this is such an emotional category. We’re solving for this by creating new partnerships with retailers and through collaborations with other brands to increase consumer awareness.”

A key period for driving awareness that J&J has identified is around back-to-

school season, which the company is capitalizing on by incentivizing consumers to stock up on first aid essentials, offering gift cards for certain dollars spent on its products and adding an element of giving back to the promotion, allowing consumers to choose whether they want to donate the gift card to a teacher on DonorsChoose.org.

Insights also drive innovation, Kelly said, highlighting the recent launch of Neosporin Burn Relief ointment, which combines Neosporin's triple antibiotic combination with pramoxine, a topical anesthetic, to relieve pain from minor burns. "When we think about home chefs and increasing direct to consumer cooking opportunities, we wanted to remind them that cuts, scrapes [and] burns can happen anywhere, and we thought that it served a need gap," she said.

Identifying such gaps — and seeing where they coincide with other macro trends — can lead to organic growth, even in categories with pillars that are as established as first aid's. That is what homeopathic company Boiron has found since it entered the bruise care segment with Arnicare Bruise Relief Gel. The product is an extension of Boiron's popular Arnicare Gel topical analgesic.

"This addresses people who have thin skin, as well as those who had plastic surgery and/or bruise easily, in general," Gary Wittenberg, vice president of national accounts at Boiron, said. "We also see an uptick during warmer weather, when people are more concerned about revealing their skin. It's also used for swelling, and it's a big baby boomer audience because your skin gets thinner as you get older, and these consumers have a tendency to bruise more."

The burgeoning category can be a boon for retailers. "It's bringing a brand to first aid that consumers may be familiar with, and it could convert nontreaters into treaters," Wittenberg said.

Using e-commerce as a tool

One of the benefits of playing in a category with such a large proportion of sales

based on immediate need is that it can somewhat insulate the category against e-commerce threats. Yet many manufacturers view e-commerce as a benefit in terms of being a source of sales from shoppers looking to stock up when they do not need a solution quickly, as well as a tool with which they can reach shoppers with messaging or gain further insight.

“When it comes to health, beauty, wellness, and, in particular, bites and stings, Amazon isn’t quick enough Creagan said. “E-commerce is growing, but I don’t think our category is growing any faster than other categories. Where it’s helpful from a manufacturing perspective is you get to see that direct feedback from consumers you don’t always get, and it provides a good snapshot of what consumers are saying about your product.”

For officials at Randob Labs, e-commerce reviews have indicated that one of its marketing efforts from several years ago is paying off.

After sponsoring a video for YouTube channel Brave Wilderness and its personality, Coyote Peterson, in which Peterson used Sting-Kill to alleviate the pain from a bullet ant sting, Creagan said he still sees online reviews mentioning the video, which has been viewed roughly 47 million times.

The ability to reach shoppers online as they are on the journey of discovery is one of the biggest benefits companies identified.

“There’s a role for omnichannel as you think about how we can reach consumers during their pre-shop when they’re researching — either pre- or post-surgery, or pre- or post-stock up,” Kelly from J&J said. “From an omnichannel all-inclusive standpoint, there’s a way to take that messaging and drive it in store and drive education messaging.”

As Boiron has sought to carve out its niche in first aid, Wittenberg said search has been integral to driving awareness and purchases, whether that is in store or

online.

“Google search plays a big role in building awareness and letting consumers know there are bruise options out there,” he said. “As in a lot of cases, consumers are looking at reviews online on Amazon and elsewhere, but that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re going to buy it at

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