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SALES STRATEGY

PepsiCo trying out consumer engagement for brand building

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Last month, PepsiCo Inc. launched Mountain Dew Game Fuel, a variant of its carbonated soft drink brand, without the usual big budget advertising and promotional campaigns. Instead, it rolled out the product with a nine-week gaming championship. The winners of the gaming contest, which involves playing games on Microsoft's gaming consoles, will have their profiles, including pictures, on the bottles of Mountain Dew Game Fuel bottles.

The campaign of the gaming championship is also running on television and digital media.

"Today, it's all about experience. While traditional advertising is needed for brand building, what makes more sense is to engage directly with real con-

sumers on ground. Start with the consumers, start from the shelves," said Vipul Prakash, vice-president (beverages), PepsiCo India Holdings Pvt. Ltd.

PepsiCo adopted a similar strategy for its snack brand Kurkure. In May, PepsiCo extended Kurkure—a salted corn puff brand present in India since 1999—to other salted Indian snacks such as *navratan mix*, *Punjabi Chatka*, *chiwda mix* and *alu bhujia*. As part of the launch, PepsiCo hit the railway tracks with Kurkure Family Express, a train that travelled across 14 states for eight days. It took 40 families for the journey, picked from more than 1,000 entries. The train was designed with artwork based on consumers' feedback on their "love for Kurkure".

According to Prakash, direct consumer engagement works better than advertising. However, he declined to quantify

PepsiCo introduced Mountain Dew Game Fuel with a nine-week gaming championship

how PepsiCo has benefited from such campaigns. He added that PepsiCo would follow this approach, and especially leverage "product packaging" over the next three to five years. "Advertising and other marketing campaigns are more for master brands to convey the brand philosophy," Prakash said.

PepsiCo started experimenting with such campaigns earlier this year. In March, when it

launched mini cans of its flagship brand Pepsi, it started the emoji campaign—#PepsiMoji. The firm changed packaging of Pepsi bottles with different emojis and even tweaked the way its vending machines function. Consumers could buy Pepsi with specific emojis printed on bottles depending on their mood.

PepsiCo is shifting gears and looking at consumer conversations in a different way, in keeping with how the world is changing, said Santosh Desai, chief executive and managing director, Future Brands Ltd. "It is a bold and an appropriate move by the company. In the last two years, Pepsi, as a brand, has struggled to lead the market," he said.

Brand leaders, said Babita Baruah, senior vice-president and head, PO1 Unit (a business unit for PepsiCo) at J Walter Thompson, have to be on top of culture, consumer trends and new forms of engagement. "With the small screen (smartphones) and the 24x7 connected consumers, engagement drives participation as well as brand conversation. Engagement is extending to new forms of collaboration like co-creation. No brand can ignore this today."