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TRY SAMPLING

OFFERING FREEBIES CAN REEL IN CUSTOMERS WHO NEVER KNEW THEY LOVED YOU. BY GWEN MORAN

To get customers to fall in love with his product, Tom First gives it away. The founder of Owater, a \$3 million Concord, Massachusetts, maker of flavor- and nutrient-enhanced water, knows what he's doing: He's one of the founders of the wildly successful Nantucket Nectars brand of juices.

"We find that at accounts where we sample regularly, we're able to increase sales, which leads to better placement in the store, which leads to even more sales," says First, 42. Owater may do as many as six or seven sampling events a day in markets like Boston, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, New York City and Philadelphia, among others.

Sampling is hot, says Patrick Hadley, whose company, Hadley Media, develops and executes sampling and experiential programs for its clients. "But you don't want to have the 17-year-old girl sampling denture products," he points out. This means hiring people who reflect your brand and training them to know your key product messages and your target audience. That way, you get the most out of the effort by getting the right messages to the right people. He also recommends thinking of logistics, such as keeping products hot or cold or providing napkins if needed.

It's even better if you can make giveaways fun, says Hadley. Contests, games, or an entertaining video or commercial can all help the customer have a memorable experience. Owater lets customers toss a cap through a ring to win a prize.

Owater's team hits events and locales that are popular with its audience, such as sports events, festivals and beaches. When holding sampling events at stores that carry the brand, First says his company is careful not to cut into the host's sales. "We don't give away bottles," he says. "Instead, we hand out small cups, and if people like the water, they can purchase it. You need to be respectful of your customer and your business."



Not-so-random sampling: Tom First makes sure his product samples go straight to his target audience.