

United Biscuits has created an internal e-community to share winning web strategies among its brands, Mark Vickery (left) and Will Ursell tell **Caspar van Vark**

Stand up if you've never placed Hula Hoops on the ends of your fingers before eating them. Is there anyone in the country who hasn't? Even the Queen has probably done it. But United Biscuits, the firm behind the snack and countless others, has been so busy marketing some products online that its customers' fingers may be spending more time on their keyboards.

The firm has two main operating categories: biscuits, of which McVitie's is the top brand, and snacks, which KP heads. Between them, they own some of the UK's most familiar products, including McCoy's, Go Ahead! and Oreo. Some have advertised online but, until recently, the company took a piecemeal approach, with each brand doing its own thing. A wise strategy, perhaps, as a packet of biscuits does not necessarily have much in common with a bag of crisps when it comes to target markets. But it also makes sense to look at brands together and let their online strategies feed off each other.

That's precisely what United Biscuits decided to do some 12 months ago when it formed an 'e-business community', for which information systems director Mark Vickery has overall responsibility. "Often, companies don't co-ordinate their online activity or they go to the other extreme and set up whole dotcom businesses," he says. "We wanted something inbetween to co-ordinate these activities, so we could learn from them. We try to set an agenda and priorities, and we're getting a more common direction and transfer of knowledge between brands."

The e-business community comprises staff from different areas of United Biscuits, separated into four main groups: commercial, operational, technology and business support. The point is not to homogenise online strategies across all brands, but to see what works and how it could be applied elsewhere.

Group brands manager Will Ursell sees the community as a way for United Biscuits to create its own best practice for web activities. "When you look around the industry, there's very little best practice and if it does exist, it's generally not in the public domain. We need to base online activity on established marketing models. It's about seeing what has and hasn't worked on these brands and saying let's not make that mistake again."

The e-business community came about during a busy year for Unit-



Hula Hoops: Steve Threlfall site has attracted 86,000 visits

ed Biscuits' online activities, with several major campaigns for Hula Hoops and Penguin. The company also hired a three-strong agency roster to handle digital campaigns: Wheel group's Abel & Baker, Oyster Partners and Cordiant's XM London.

Abel & Baker is heavily involved with Hula Hoops, but the other two agencies' activities are under wraps. "Using these three agencies, we want to buy into real competence in online marketing. It's about agencies which have this as their core competency – we had 30 firms to choose from," says Vickery.

So why is online activity being stepped up? Ursell points to the growing importance of the internet, which has made it necessary to consider a more cohesive approach. But he also believes digital media need to be handled with care. "Internet users make more rational decisions about the brands they want to see. Offline advertising has a fairly low involvement factor, but the internet is high-involvement. Consumers make an active decision to go online and this has an impact on their relationship with the brand. It's almost a direct dialogue."

Ursell sees content as key to a successful online formula, which could involve a tie-up with an established online presence. Penguin has a partnership with the Cartoon Network, which integrates the chocolate biscuit with its web site, TV channel and comic.

"The link with Cartoon Network is absolutely spot

Take a bite

on," enthuses Ursell. "This is somewhere that kids go and the site manages a huge amount of content. The objective is for Penguin to be part of this content, so kids interact with the brand on a regular basis. This is how you build an emotional attachment with a brand."

The partnership started in spring 2001 with activity for Flipper Dipper, a variant of the Penguin biscuit. In April this year, United Biscuits ran another campaign, based on the Penguin Boomroom (see panel, p24), which entered its second phase in September. Both campaigns use games on microsites at Cartoon Network's site and are integrated with its offline content.

It's a great match of brands, says Penguin marketing manager Andy Young. "Cartoon Network's brand values are similar to our own. It's about cheekiness and a bit of fun. The number one reason why kids go online is to play games. Rather than set up our own site, it makes sense to work with a relevant partner."

The current phase of Penguin's campaign sees the return of the Boomroom microsite, as well as TV spots and ads in the Cartoon Network comic, but this time there are no on-pack promotions directing buyers to the site. This is not because it didn't work, says Young, but because other activities planned for later in the year made such a promotion too complicated.

Does this mean that Penguin's offline marketing exists only to get people online? "I wouldn't say we're narrowly focused online. We're just making sure we have integration in the marketing mix. Internet penetration at home and in school is key to kids' lives," says Young. "Television will continue to be a mainstay of our communications, but the internet

is different, because it is an active choice for kids to be there."

The internet is clearly growing in importance for the brand – Young describes the initial online budget in 2001 as "less significant" than its recent activity, on which it is spending a "large six-figure sum". He doesn't rule out other partnerships either.

Hula Hoops has its own site (www.hulahoops.com) and two campaigns have backed it this year. The first was for Shoks, a variant of the crisp, and was themed around electric eels (see panel, p25). The second is for Hula Hoops itself, based on dopey bloke-on-the-street Steve Threlfall. Marketing manager Sarah Robinson says: "The Hula Hoops site has been around for about three years, but the Shoks campaign was the first time it was directly involved in advertising. It's more relevant now."

The campaign began in May with dhtml ads on sites such as NME.com and Peoplesound leading users to a game called 'Eelex-

trix'. That was followed two weeks later by a

TV campaign on satellite and then on

terrestrial. In one TV ad, electric eels

were released into the water sys-

tem; an idea so scary for younger

viewers that the Independent

Television Commission imposed

a 7.30pm watershed. "The ad

was banned on the campaign's

last day, so it wasn't a major

issue for us," says Ursell. "But it

did drive more people to the web

site, where they

could

still



Penguin draws consumers with Cartoon Network tie-up



It was the first time that we have had online activity integrated with an on-pack promotion

Andy Young
Penguin

In April this year, Penguin launched a campaign around Penguin Boomroom Volume 1 (www.penguinboomroom.co.uk), hosted by the Cartoon Network web site.

Five million Penguin bar wrappers directed consumers to the Boomroom. Each wrapper contained one of 24 different codes, which users could enter on the site to access noise samples and even mix their own.

A separate games site was also launched on Cartoon Network, featuring 'Samurai Sushi' and 'Venice Menace'. The games starred a penguin that went around the world trying to catch fish in rather inappropriate places for a penguin – a Japanese sushi bar and the canals of Venice.

Penguin marketing manager Andy Young says that figures for the campaign are being



Boomroom Volume 2: second phase of the Penguin campaign will update the web site

compiled, but he anticipates a good result. "Our 'Flipper Dipper' campaign on Cartoon Network in 2001 drew about 150,000 unique users and eight per cent clickthroughs [according to Cartoon Network]. The average clickthrough for Boomroom was about eight per cent, coming from the Cartoon Network home page, buttons

and banners. And I estimate that we'll have double the number of unique users."

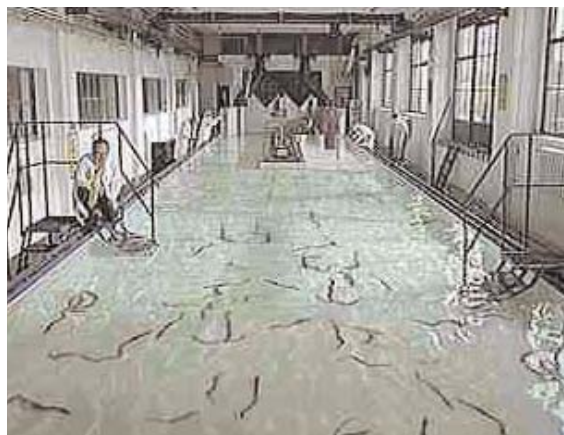
Young says the five million wrappers were the most important tool, but other offline elements also helped drive traffic to the Boomroom site. There were 20-second TV spots on the Cartoon Network channel, along with advertising in its comic.

"It was the first time that we have had online activity integrated with an on-pack promotion," adds Young.

The push moved into a second phase on 2 September with the launch of Boomroom Volume 2. There's a new version of the Penguin game, set in London Zoo, and a competition to win a Penguin keyring.

see the ad. It made people ask 'have you seen those ads?'" While the Shoks site played a prominent role in the campaign, Ursell insists it wasn't meant to be the only star of the show. "The Shoks site reinforces and builds on the broadcast messages," he says. "The features on the site were supporting the offline ads."

Robinson backs this, saying: "The offline activity is there in its own right. This was a product launch, so we couldn't be as targeted as we might have been with an existing brand. The internet activity is more tightly targeted at 16- to 24-year-olds, but the offline stuff is mass market." She adds that only about five per cent of the marketing



Shoks: after the TV ad was banned, people could see it online

budget goes online.

There was plenty of other activity, too: 3,000 six-sheet posters at impulse sites such as corner shops and in washrooms, plus sampling in several major cities such as Cardiff, Glasgow and Birmingham. The sampling continued the eel theme, with technicians in lab coats walking around with eel detectors.

The campaign based around Steve Threlfall broke this summer and the Hula Hoops site has been revamped to tie in. The format is similar to the Shoks work, using internet ads followed by satellite and terrestrial TV spots, and posters at 4,000 sites.

Unlike Shoks, however, offline ads direct people to the site, which plays a more prominent role. An advertorial ran in Heat magazine in August, suggesting Steve was into Irish dancing. The ad drove readers to the site, where they could watch Steve doing his jig, apparently having been filmed by his mum, June.

Steve Threlfall was created by Publicis, the advertising agency that works across United Biscuits' brands. It partnered with digital agency Abel & Baker for the web element. "The online portion is the media glue holding the other activities together," says Chris Clarke, creative account director at Abel & Baker. To date, the Steve Threlfall site has had 77,000 unique visitors, 86,000 site visits and 3,691 recommendations to friends. The average time spent on the site was eight minutes, but has risen to 10 minutes since the Irish dancing video was added.

But what about United Biscuits' other brands? McCoy's and Frisps

Shoks' fun eels campaign proved popular with kids



The feedback was stunning and hilarious. It was like having a constant focus group, which is rare

Chris Clarke
Abel & Baker

Electric eels were the creative backbone of the Shoks campaign. A variety of online and offline media was used in the activity, but it germinated online before spreading into the other areas.

The heart of the online activity was a game called 'Eelextrix', which was on the Shoks microsite at hulahoops.com.

Players were cast as electric eels. They had to travel through water pipes and try to electrocute unsuspecting members of the public in their baths, who then died amid bloodcurdling screams.

At the beginning of the online campaign, there was a mailing which told people about the Shoks site and tried to initiate some word-of-mouth activity.

Meanwhile, a dhtml ad was

launched, featuring a woman taking a bath who discovers that she's sharing the water with an eel. At first, the dhtml ran unbranded on NME.com, Peoplesound, Vitaminic.co.uk and Capitalfm.com. It was later branded and included a clickthrough to the site where viewers could play the 'Eelextrix' game.

"The product itself is aimed at the gaming market too,"

says Chris Clarke, creative account director at Abel & Baker, which created the game. "The kind of packaging that Shoks has is aimed at keyboard users."

Clarke says the game proved to be hugely popular with younger users in particular and that the feedback facility on the site was also a success.

"Users have spent an average of eight to nine minutes

playing the game and sending feedback, and that feedback was stunning and often hilarious," he says. "Kids were saying things like 'whoever invented this game really knows what kids like'. We had thousands of emails. Having that kind of feedback is like having a constant focus group; it's rare to get that much response.

"You hear a lot about dialogue marketing, but that's what this really was," enthuses Clarke.

To date, the Shoks site has received 105,000 unique visitors and 3,225 users have told their friends about it, according to Abel & Baker. Of those, 1,538 friends have responded by also visiting the site.



'Eelextrix': players navigated water pipes to attack bathers



About UB

Markets UK; Spain; Netherlands; France; Portugal; Belgium

Biscuit brands McVitie's UK;

BN (France); Delacre (France & Belgium); Verkade (Netherlands); Nabisco (Europe)

Snack brands KP Snacks; Derwent Valley Foods; KP Nuts

Web sites kpnuts.com; delacre.com; mccoys.co.uk; frisps.co.uk; hulahoops.com; kpdiscos.co.uk; brannigans.co.uk

Brands owned McVitie's; Penguin; Oreo; Go Ahead!; Hula Hoops; McCoy's; Frisps; Chips Ahoy!; BN; Verkade; Sultana; Jaffa Cakes; Delacre; Filipinos; Mini Cheddars; Phileas Fogg; KP Nuts

Sales 2001 £1.3bn (£924m biscuits; £339m snacks)

Value of UK biscuit market £1.5bn

Share of UK biscuit market 22 per cent (£330m)

are online, but they are little more than holding sites compared with the level of activity for Hula Hoops and Penguin. Ursell says this is because these two brands work well online and the firm is learning from them. "We've just been through brand planning, so we'll see more activity from that next year, but Penguin and Hula Hoops are most relevant now. They target young people, which is partly why they work well online."

He doesn't see web activity being limited to 'young' brands. "When you look at the overall trends, the under-45s spend a lot of time online. It's relevant to a whole raft of consumers." Although he admits: "A number of our brands wouldn't work online – a number of small brands can't support that level of investment. You've got to look at it on a brand-by-brand basis."

Mobile marketing is an unexplored area and Ursell is cautious about venturing there. "You have to be careful about how intrusive it is, particularly with text messaging. It's as easy to switch people off as it is to switch them on if you pester them with rubbish. It might happen, but we need to be careful how we use it."

Young echoes this view, but acknowledges that there is potential for using mobile marketing around Penguin. "Access to mobiles is pretty high for kids. We would need a reason to do it for the brand, but it could be relevant." But he is philosophical about the limits: "There is so much going on in kids' lives. We're not the only ones involved. We know they like our games and our brand, but there are also brands such as Nike and Adidas, and at the end of the day, we're a chocolate biscuit bar." □