

brand features - profile

An ongoing series of the history behind selected brands.



ICA
on location

by Stefan Engeseth

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Sweden's three dominant players, ICA, COOP and Axfood, account for about 90 percent of food retailing nationwide. Similar in offerings, ICA (a unit of the sinking Dutch-based international food retailer Ahold) hit upon an interesting concept to differentiate itself while still immersing the consumer in its products and services.

ICA's ongoing advertising campaign takes on a short-story form set in local ICA stores where actors depict staff members and customers in real-life situations. The commercials create buzz, and people actively look forward to the next episode. In fact, the ads are so popular some of the actors have been elevated to national celebrity status.

To finance the commercials, ICA allows other brands and products to co-brand episodes. The product offering is mirrored at ICA stores to create consistency with what the store is advertising and selling. This also gives branded products a chance to promote their wares on a level with ICA's large private-label selection.

From an internal branding viewpoint, the realistic settings and situations inspire staff and help build a passion for the company culture. Consistent with the themes and messages in the advertising vehicle, ICA compiled a comic book that depicted similar situations for an internal communications piece.

Of course, the challenge for ICA is how to make the in-store brand experience as exciting as the commercials. How can ICA ensure that the brand lives up to the communication?

One idea would be for ICA to involve the customer more actively. Instead of merely watching the advertisements, customers could be invited to participate. Even if this only involves the person acting as a normal customer shopping for food, the excitement of involving everyday people would make the customer feel more actively involved in the brand.

About three million Swedes belong to ICA's customer loyalty program. ICA could reward and encourage these customers by allowing them to be stand-ins or act in the commercials. If they have an opportunity to act, mix with the product offerings and perhaps even earn extra points on their membership card, the momentum of brand promotion could be tremendous.

Financing could come directly from co-branding sponsorship and product placement. And publicity could come from involving customers further, such as allowing them to vote for "best actor" online.

ICA could also further develop its website to enhance communication, and in turn, its brand. Currently commercials can be downloaded from the ongoing series (www.ica.se), but perhaps ICA could use the Internet as a collective think tank with possibilities for customers to be part of the creation of the commercials by directing their own episode or even recommending products to feature. This type of online involvement leads to further promotion of the brand.

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