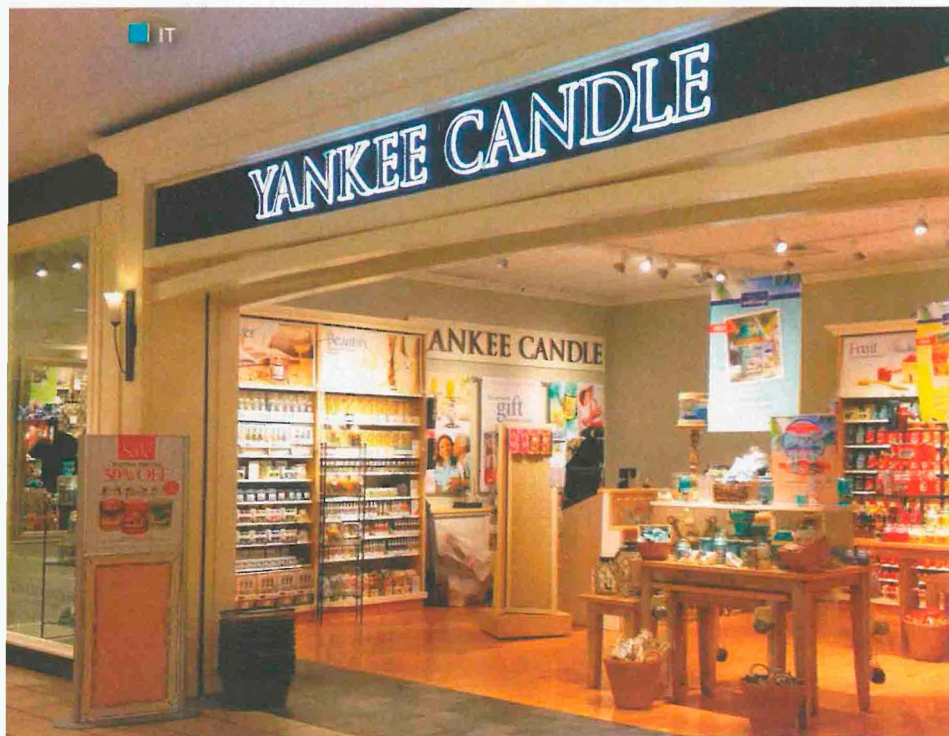# See What They're Saying

Yankee Candle lights up customer feedback

by DEENA M. AMATO-McCOY

Yankee Candle's products are ubiquitous; they are sold in nearly 40,000 stores, as well as through direct mail catalogs and its e-commerce operation. The seasonal nature of product lines means the company pays close attention to customer trends, and a formal analytics department was created three years ago.

The group draws information from various sources, including focus groups and online interactions, both of which rely on verbal interactions. Still, "There was a disconnect between how [customers] described their homes and our internal language, and how we differentiated between the two," says Allison Bleyler, Yankee Candle's director of consumer insights.

"We struggled to understand why consumers would describe to us the style of their home, yet purchase home décor items that didn't match."

THE EMOTIONAL FACTOR

The devil was in the details, and where these details typically lie is in subconscious emotions. It is these emotions that heavily influence consumer purchase decisions.

"Unfortunately, traditional market research techniques can't help us understand these authentic emotions very well," says David Forbes, president and CEO of Forbes Consulting Group. "That's because they all require respondents to answer questions by talking — and the emotional brain can't talk."

Eager to link verbal cues with visuals to get a clear style perception, Yankee Candle partnered with Forbes Consulting on a study to help the retailer's creative and design teams develop products more targeted to its customers' tastes. An internal team worked with the firm to create a library of some 200 images, representing a large variety of décor styles, using Forbes' MindSight Experiential Discovery tool.

Customers took a three-minute visual questionnaire that enabled them to input a variety of emotional cues. Through the Louvain statistical technique — a method for identifying "communities" in large networks — emotional themes can be identified in consumers' life experiences. Analysis then identifies "communities" of images from the selections made by consumers.

"Our working team reviewed results and used these details to refine our product planning and understand how to integrate these style preferences into future work," says Bleyler. "Their tool was invaluable because it took verbal language out of the mix and created a visual language for understanding styles."

Roughly 600 people were invited to participate anonymously, and with each picture's response and click-through Yankee Candle "learned how to build our internal language about how to describe styles," she says.

IMPROVED DECISIONS

The more retailers can use analytics to unleash the power in data, the more they will improve their decision-making.

"End users continue to prioritize business intelligence and information-centric projects and [related] spending to improve decision-making and analysis," says Dan Sommer, a research director in Gartner's technology and service provider research group.

For Yankee Candle, these improved decisions came in the form of internal efficiencies when developing future collections. "Now when we look at style boards, we don't have to waste time discussing whether concepts will target specific customer segments," says Bleyler.

The information also enables the retailer to speak "the same language" as its shoppers across all categories. While there are no plans to launch a new study using the analytical tool, "we will be using the output tool to analyze future studies on future collections," she says. **STORES**

Deena M. Amato-McCoy is a New York-based freelance journalist who covers retail technology. When she's not writing about retail, she is often testing her theories "in the field."