



A Dependable Dozen

Twelve c-store suppliers earn recognition for outstanding category management initiatives By Susan Durtschi, Past Times Marketing

LED BY EIGHT REPEAT WINNERS FROM LAST YEAR, 12 convenience channel suppliers earned kudos this year in the sixth-annual *Convenience Store News* Category Captains awards program, which recognizes leading suppliers for outstanding category management initiatives that have demonstrably enhanced overall category sales and profits for the retailers they serve.

This year's repeat winners include Anheuser-Busch, Convenience Valet, McLane Co. Inc., Swisher International Inc., The Hershey Co., The Coca-Cola Co. and Tyson Convenience. S. Abraham & Sons Inc., which won last year in the General Merchandise category, is the winner this year in the Foodservice/Hot Beverages category.

All entries for this year's contest were judged based on:

- Product innovation;
- Creativity in merchandising, marketing, promotion and advertising;
- Use of consumer insights to drive category sales;
- Innovative and dynamic category management tools;
- Demonstrated commitment to meeting the specific needs of retailer customers;
- Efficiently lifting sales for the entire product category; and
- Fact-based evidence of market-specific or account-specific results.

Past Times Marketing, a consumer research and product evaluation firm based in New York, once again facilitated the judging based on information supplied by participating companies.

Here's an in-depth look at the 2019 Category Captains:

ALTERNATIVE SNACKS: General Mills

General Mills has taken snack bar research to a new level by spelling out new trends in consumer behavior. Alternative snacks is a large and growing category in convenience stores. Although fueled primarily by meat snacks (which make up about 60 percent of the share), the category generates sizeable sales of nutrition bars and granola bars.



Despite low levels of awareness and engagement for bars in the convenience channel (four out of five shoppers walk past the section without even slowing, compared to salty snacks where one out of two shoppers will engage), this segment has continued to grow in dollar sales, warranting breaking out and adding dedicated space for nutrition bars.

Seeing the growth potential in this space, General Mills invested in research to better understand the category dynamics from a truly consumer-first lens. Leveraging a proprietary snack bar segmentation study, a deep dive into the c-store path to purchase and an extensive in-store audit, General Mills has positioned itself to bring retail and distributor partners a more robust and holistic understanding of this important category.

This category leadership has allowed General Mills to maintain category captaincy across its key partners — providing



**E-CIGARETTE/VAPOR PRODUCTS:
E-Alternative Solutions**

E-Alternative Solutions (EAS) is at the forefront in supporting retail and wholesale customers in category



growth through maintaining and growing the core vaping business, while expanding with innovative technology that meets adult consumers' needs and high expectations.

An independent, family-owned provider of electronic alternatives to cigarettes, EAS' vapor products are research-tested, U.S. made (with domestic and imported ingredients) and marketed only to adult smokers. The company is committed to innovation, category growth and, ultimately, leading the industry into the promise of "A World Beyond Smoking."

Together with its sister company Swisher International Inc., EAS brings decades of collective experience — and an intimate understanding of tobacco industry shortfalls — to design programs that can be customized to business models and consumer bases.



EAS has undertaken a leadership role in the creation of sensible industry standards and regulations, helping to formulate the Vapor Technology Association (VTA) marketing standards. Its work on the VTA board of directors advances the interests of the industry's manufacturers, wholesalers, small business owners and entrepreneurs.

Widely considered authorities on the rapidly evolving regulatory landscape, EAS executives are frequently sought to speak on the complex legal issues facing the industry, including such topics as responsible marketing practices,

understanding and meeting Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requirements and how to navigate the plethora of state laws regarding the vapor category.

In the past five years, most EAS accounts have experienced both the highs and lows of the vaping category, and the supplier has stepped in to help lessen the uncertainty in the market with solid advice and retail support, such as by guaranteeing its product.



The additional depth of experience at EAS is layered on top of robust analysis to help top national accounts reinvigorate their investment in vaping and help mitigate the volatility of unclear regulatory guidelines, thereby rebuilding a fast-growing category within their tobacco sections.

EAS has also advocated for recategorization of data to properly reflect the current vaping market, including nicotine salt, disposables and sub-ohm vapor systems, so that customers have the tools and options needed to meet and exceed adult consumer preferences in their stores. Training of store staff and discussions on space (category) management and adult consumer preferences then ensure results. In two years, EAS has captured more than 20 percent of the vaping category business in large chains.

**FOODSERVICE/HOT BEVERAGES:
S. Abraham & Sons Inc.**

Coffee generates more than 77 percent of overall hot beverage sales at c-stores.



S. Abraham & Sons' (SAS) Beantown Gourmet Coffee is sold at 500-plus locations from Wisconsin to Maine. SAS is leading the hot beverage industry as a wholesale distributor with unrivaled digital menu solutions as part of its refreshed program, launched in the third quarter of 2018.

SAS is engaging retailers to create better customer experiences through digital communication solutions. Customers perceive digital environments as modern and clean, which can impact return visits and encourage brand loyalty. Dynamically designed menus foster a consistent message and schedule, and can achieve 100 percent brand compliance. This is reflected in increased profits and customer loyalty with a premium brand coffee program offering a wide variety of marketing solutions. The "best practices" within a premium brand encourage and engage customers from the pump to the cash register and create a coffee shop atmosphere with pumptoppers, premium signage and wall coverings that shout "freshly brewed."

Beantown Gourmet Coffees are comprised of 100 percent Arabica beans and produced by a third-generation, family-owned coffee roaster with more than 85 years of





experience. The flavor profile has been refined to match the demands of today's coffee drinker with precise "drop weights" developed for each roast — delivering great coffee, batch after batch. Portioned packages of ground coffee ensure consistent brewing, efficient cleanup and maximized profits.

With 15 distinct coffee roasts and 11 flavors of cappuccino, retailers can build a portfolio to meet and target their customers' unique desires. The new flagship program also launched with updated and redesigned attractive insulated paper cups — available in four sizes — that carry the Beantown name and spread awareness of the premium brand. The comprehensive gourmet Beantown hot beverage program is available to SAS retailers without any additional franchise fees.

Participating SAS retail locations are outfitted with high-quality Bunn coffee equipment and serviced regularly at no charge. The SAS and Bunn teams work with store personnel to help train their teams on the steps to brew and maintain a delicious pot every time.

Menu format choices are either: traditional printed boards or modern digital displays. Digital screens with custom menu designs are supplied at no additional charge. Not only do these offerings shelter retailers from otherwise expensive static menu costs, but the total return-on-investment of digital menuboards extends to numerous other aspects.

SAS partners who opt for the digital offerings instantly increase the visibility of merchandising messages, creating twofold opportunities to increase sales margins by maximizing seasonal offerings and/or special limited-time-only flavors.

FOODSERVICE/PREPARED FOOD:

Tyson Convenience

The Tyson Convenience team offers its customers turnkey product solutions, including labor-saving fully cooked proteins, packaged sandwiches and handheld prepared foods with branded packaging in the display case. The supplier also provides sales support to its customers by providing digital images and assets to leverage in their marketing efforts.



Tyson Convenience offers equipment options to fit retailers' needs across the foodservice spectrum, from retailers new to foodservice to more experienced retailers interested in expanding their offering. From roller grills to warmers, Tyson provides options for any space, along with a variety of accessories. In-store support includes branded merchandising from its portfolio of products and brands,



providing retailers with the means to serve leading brands. In addition, Tyson Convenience strives to provide its customers with insights and in-store support that will assist in managing today's ever-changing convenience channel. In 2018, Tyson expanded its turnkey product solutions, including the NAE (No Antibiotics Ever) Tyson Red Label poultry offering. The supplier also made efforts to simplify retailers' need to order, stock and manage inventory separately by integrating branded packaging into the protein purchases. Retailers saw the value in offering Tyson-branded products that were prepared fresh in-store.

Also in 2018, Tyson Convenience introduced new product innovations and on-trend offerings, including: Jimmy Dean Stuffed Hash Browns; four new Skinless Smoked Sausage flavors from Hillshire Farm; Tyson Red Label Wings in bone-in varieties; and the BIG AZ Kick Az Croissant Sandwich made with fiery sriracha glazed sausage.

Tyson Convenience positions itself as a trusted partner in the convenience channel dedicated to innovation for the benefit of retailers of all sizes by providing a broad and continually expanding portfolio of products and leading brands, as well as unparalleled support.

GENERAL MERCHANDISE: Eby-Brown Co. LLC

Eby-Brown delivers center-of-store general merchandising growth opportunities, at no cost, through its proprietary category management solution called SmartProcess, whereby the wholesaler gains an intimate knowledge of its customers' stores through leveraging a survey methodology for each store's sales data within the chain. This captures the configuration of fixtures and the size of each category in the center store, enabling recommendations that custom-fit each store's needs.



Another element of the data analysis methodology is leveraging best-of-breed syndicated regional/national industry