

Sundays in Business

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Social media key to Express program

By Tim Feran

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Taking another step in its sales strategy, fashion retailer Express has launched a new loyalty program that rewards customers for tweeting about their favorite clothes.

Express Next replaces the Columbus-based retailer's previous loyalty program that was only available to Express credit-card holders.

Customers still earn points by buying merchandise in store and online at express.com, but under the new program, they can get more points any time they visit an Express store and "engage with the brand" through social media.

In other words, a customer can earn points simply by posting on Twitter about a favorite pair of pants — reviewing the product or by "checking in" on Facebook at a store register.

Customers receive a \$10 reward for every 2,500 points earned or \$250 spent. Customers who reach 7,500 points are designated as "A-List" and earn a \$15 reward for every 2,500 points.

"We've been getting great feedback on Twitter and Facebook from our followers and our fans," spokeswoman Barbie Coleman said. "We've exceeded

our initial enrollment expectations, and customers seem to be responding really well to the program."

Customers can join the new program free, either in person at an Express store or online at express.com/next.

"It's a very clever twist on the whole loyalty-card concept, which is getting a little stale," said Chris Boring, founder of Boulevard Strategies. "Most of us don't have enough room in our wallets or our key chains for so many of them."

Putting a social-media wrinkle in its loyalty program is the latest step for the company's surging digital endeavor. A year ago, Express moved to the front of the social-media wave by launching a Facebook page on which customers can buy anything in its inventory. The Facebook page now has 2 million "fans."

"They're trying to be pioneers," Boring said. "They're early, but a lot of their customers are early adopters. So it makes sense for a brand like Express to be tech-forward."



It started with a doodle

Columbus-based artist Jason Tharp has joined with online pop-culture apparel retailer Ripple Junction to launch Ohiya, a merchandise line featuring T-shirts, posters, plush dolls, canvas prints, key chains and stickers.

Tharp, a self-proclaimed "obsessive dreamer," created the cast of characters that is "all

about the art of making friends." The idea is to encourage people to take the initiative and simply say "Hi" to one another, he said.

The name is a mashup of the

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friendly greeting — "Oh, hi ya" — and his home state.

Tharp, who grew up in Fredricktown, in Knox County, and went to school at Columbus College of Art & Design, worked at Limited Brands for about six years before striking out on his own about half a dozen years ago.

"I am a constant doodler," he said. "I'll doodle on everything, it's just one of those things. Every once in a while, I'll come up with a character and it just keeps popping up in my sketchbook. These characters started taking shape around April last year, but they were doodles that existed for a while before that."

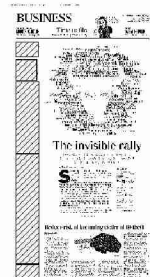
The Ohiya merchandise features a variety of kitten-like characters with their own history. The cast includes Zombuddiez, Smooch, Zoomipop, Myth-taken and Katinja.

"They're cute, but the fact that there's a zombie cat makes people laugh," he said. "We've been going to trade shows and people have liked the look." The line launched nationwide last month, "and things are starting to pick up now that it's become a brand."

Etch A Shirt?

Ohio Art Co. is milking the recent publicity involving Etch A Sketch for everything it can, including weighing a possible line of T-shirts.

The move comes after a Mitt Romney aide last month indicated that the candidate could reset his campaign after the Republican primaries "like an Etch A Sketch — you can



kind of shake it up, and we start all over again.”

After that remark, shares of Ohio Art zoomed on the stock market.

Larry Killgallon, president and chief operating officer of Ohio Art Co., recently said, “We’re talking about creating T-shirts and the kind of things we could bring to the (Republican) convention.”

“We need to sustain this,” Killgallon told Bloomberg TV’s Margaret Brennan. “If we keep this dialogue going between the campaigns and Etch A Sketch, it will be great.”

A really big shoe

DSW’s aggressive rollout of stores, announced in January, is continuing with another big store in a major shopping area.

The Columbus-based footwear and accessories retailer went supersize with the recent opening in the heart of San Francisco’s Union Square shopping district.

The San Francisco location covers four floors and 40,000 square feet. It’s about double the size of the average DSW store’s 22,000 square feet and is even bigger than the 33,000-square-foot location DSW opened recently in New York’s fashion district.

Penney for their thoughts

J.C. Penney launched its new simplified pricing strategy with its eyes open. Officials warned investors that it might take time to catch on with customers. Now, a survey of shoppers suggests that customers are indeed warming to it.

Citi analyst Deborah Weinswig recently wrote to investors about her company’s survey on the subject, which finds that 26 percent of the store’s shoppers say the new pricing model will lead them to shop more, while only 8 percent said it would make them shop less.

The plan, announced in February, features month-long sales to replace morning-only sales and other gimmicks as well as a plan to divide stores into specialty shops, similar to the Sephora and Mango shops currently in operation.

However, despite the company’s efforts to publicize the new pricing plan, the retailer has a long way to go in letting people know about it. One-third of customer weren’t aware of the change, the survey found.

Retail Watch appears on the third Sunday of each month. Material for this column can be directed to the author.

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