

'Alpha Moms' pitch Nintendo Wii

The game company takes an innovative viral approach to drum up support for its new console.

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December 25, 2006



Mother knows best.

As it geared up to promote its new Wii video game console, Nintendo of America Inc. looked to a group better known for nagging kids to *stop* playing video games: moms.

The Japanese game company merged viral marketing techniques with Tupperware parties in the months leading up to the Nov. 19 launch of Wii, which is pronounced “whee.” Nintendo recruited a handful of gregarious, tech-savvy moms — whom it dubbed “alpha moms” — to share the console with their friends.

Linda Perry, who started a Yahoo parents’ group called Peachhead, was one of three designated, and decidedly animated, buzz-makers in Los Angeles. She sent out chalkboards inviting 35 friends to “come out and play” in a bash at one of the city’s favorite star haunts, the Chateau Marmont.

“Most people were like, ‘I don’t play games,’ “ said Perry, 41, of Venice Beach. But by the end of the night, she said, “everybody was playing it. People were working up a sweat.”

Getting the Wii’s TV-remote-style controller in the hands of non-gamers is a key element of Nintendo’s strategy to broaden its appeal beyond the young men who usually can be counted on to snap up new game systems.

The Wii’s simplified, wireless controller has motion sensing technology that translates a swing of the arm to the movements of a character’s tennis racket on screen — and removes the intimidating cluster of buttons that can scare away the casual player.

“Our core presumption is if we could get someone to put their hands on the controller, they would be hooked,” said George Harrison, Nintendo of America’s senior vice president of marketing and corporate communications.

At a time when the media audience is fragmenting, it doesn’t hurt to build a little enthusiasm with such grass-roots campaigns, said Peter Sealey, a former chief marketing officer for the Coca-Cola Co. who will teach marketing at the Peter Drucker and Masatoshi Ito Graduate School of Management at Claremont Graduate University.

“I think you’re seeing more of this, especially in those categories where word of mouth is a powerful motivator,” he said. “The purchase of cars, fine wines, dining. You’ve got to get a buzz going.”

Nintendo learned from its experience in Japan that it could succeed by developing games for a market its rivals largely ignored — adults over 30 and so-called lapsed gamers, who no longer have hours to devote to getting really good at a video game.

For example, Nintendo has sold more than 7 million copies of the game “Brain Age,” with simple math problems and other memory exercises touted as a way for baby boomers to keep mentally sharp. About 35% of the people who bought the game — and the hardware to play it, the portable Nintendo DS — were first-time gamers.

“We were at the AARP convention in Anaheim in the fall,” Harrison said. “I’m sure we were the only video game company there.”

Similarly, Nintendo eschewed traditional television advertising for the Wii. Instead of blitzing programs like “Pokemon” or “World Wrestling Entertainment” bouts with commercials aimed at its core market — 6- to 24-year-olds — it opted for shows parents and kids watch together, such as “Dancing With the Stars” and “American Idol.” It set up Wii consoles in malls to offer a

hands-on experience to the curious.

“We knew that we could probably sell all the Wiis that we brought to the marketplace to boys between the ages of 9 to 24,” Harrison said. “It wasn’t a question of could we sell the product. But when it got into the house, through no matter what channel, are more people engaged in playing it?”

Nintendo hosted what it described as “organic events” in eight cities — Boston, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, Miami, San Francisco, Tonganoxie, Kan., and Austin, Texas.

The company hired a consultant to identify three sets of “ambassadors” in each city: a core gamer/loyalist who would sing the praises of the system to other gamers; a large multi-generational family, where everyone from the kids to the grandparents could take turns with the Wii remote; and an alpha mom, who would presumably spread the word at schoolyards, soccer fields and her neighborhood.

“The vast majority of people were not video game players, or had potentially a negative attitude about video games. But we identified them as people who were influential in their community,” said Harrison of Nintendo. “One of the things we were concerned about was if we started advertising on television to this audience, they wouldn’t pay attention. We felt like we had to open up the audience’s willingness to hear from us before we started the TV advertising.”

Nintendo is working to position the Wii as a chip-powered equivalent of the game board, so it won’t disappear into a teenager’s bedroom but will remain in the family room where everyone can play. That’s why it enclosed a copy of the “Wii Sports” game with every console, so even the most technophobic family member could try one of the arcade-styled versions of bowling, tennis, baseball, golf or boxing.

“That game seemed to be the secret ingredient,” Harrison said. “Anyone can get involved, whether you know how to bowl or you don’t or you know how to play tennis or don’t.”

It’s a calculated gambit on Nintendo’s part to let Microsoft Corp.’s Xbox 360 and Sony Computer Entertainment’s PlayStation 3 battle it out for the core gamers. It fared badly in the last round of console wars, with its GameCube relegated to third place by the Xbox.

So far, Nintendo’s unorthodox strategy appears to be paying off.

The most recent U.S. sales data from NPD shows Nintendo sold 476,000 units in November, twice the volume of PlayStation 3, which was in short supply, and nearly matching that of the Xbox 360, which sold 511,000 units. Wii was the most sought-after electronics item among Internet searchers, with searches for it outnumbering those for the PlayStation 3 by 3 to 1, according to online researcher Hitwise.

Sealey said Nintendo’s viral marketing efforts have succeeded.

“On a Friday night a movie opens in Westwood, by Sunday morning the kids have talked to all their friends. The word is out,” said Sealey, who was also a former president of marketing and distribution for Columbia Pictures. “That happened here. The Wii got introduced. The PlayStation didn’t have enough units. That started a brush fire. It’s like when a movie takes hold.”