



Hilversum, Netherlands

Return to sender: dump orange freebies back at supermarkets

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The Dutch are usually a sober lot. That is until national sentiment is aroused by success at an international sporting event, like this year's World Cup in South Africa. Then all hell breaks loose and the national colour sets the tone. But what to do with all that orange paraphernalia when normal life resumes?

While the rest of the Netherlands is gearing up for a possible place in the World Cup final, Amsterdam-based consultancy Opinionators has launched a Return to Sender campaign to dump tons of World Cup freebies back where they came from: the local supermarket.

The Dutch retail sector has been quick to cash in on the outpouring of national sentiment during the World Cup. As a result sustainability pledges are thrown out the window and loads of collectible plastic goodies are produced to attract customers. The worst offenders are the supermarkets.

Freebies

Following up the success of an orange ball of fluff called the 'Welpie' for the 2008 European Cup, this year the Netherlands' largest supermarket, Albert Heijn, has given away at least 31 million 'Beesies' (cute hairy 15 cm orange caterpillars in orange, red, white or blue) for the World Cup. Not to mention the tens of thousands of Gogos, Handjes, Stackies, Sparkies and other giveaways handed out by 13 rival chains.

They're fun and they're free. And that's why we accept them with every purchase we make. Some of these freebies are so popular that young children have been known to hang around outside the shops begging for superfluous items. But what about that sustainability pledge?

Donations

On Saturday, Dutch daily Trouw reported that Albert Heijn had been persuaded to take any unwanted Beesies back to be given a second life. They may be donated to development organisations and could end up in the hands of children in Third World countries. In response, Emilie van Rappard of Opinionators says, "We are sceptical, but the fact is they are responding to public sentiment that this is 'too much' and 'too irresponsible'." The supermarket is not prepared to recycle the Beesies for the next major event. Then it plans to create a whole new craze.

The supermarkets are in a difficult position. There is a direct relationship between giving away freebies and turnover. Where once they had to join in to keep up with the rest, now they have to continue churning out junk for fear of losing out. Now everyone is offering free collectible gifts with their products, the effect on turnover is less marked. And companies are prepared to put up with the damage to their green image in exchange for a merchandising campaign to temporarily boost sales.

So the ball is in the court of the consumer. If we didn't put up with this woeful waste, supermarkets wouldn't produce it. Opinionators has called on consumers to return their freebies, preferably with an explanatory letter. The firm suggests collecting unwanted freebies door-to-door or playing hide and seek by putting the Beesies back on the supermarket shelves. But if you really want to make a point, why not go mad and organise an orange flashmob or even a supermarket striptease?

Read more: www.meerwillenweten.nl/nl/actie (in Dutch)