



What's the big idea?

By Alan Brooks

If the pre-Xmas High Street scrum-down is still on the agenda, or there's no escaping the January sales, there is a way to block out those wonderful in-store radio stations playing *Here comes Santa Claus* - at least temporarily!

Take a step back. Look across all the aisles, merchandising and harassed check-out staff. And ask yourself: "What's the big idea?"

In 1846 William Henry Smith had a big idea. He saw that the rapid expansion of the railway network was creating a new market....people on the move with time to spare. He invented not just a shop but a concept - the "stationer" - selling newspapers, pens and paper at railway stations.

Since then the business has grown rapidly onto virtually every travel concourse and high street in the UK. But in the last year or so the papers that Smith's sells have carried some pretty dire news about the chain. £200million pension black hole. Profit warnings. Pre-tax losses.

So what's gone wrong? Take a quick survey around

any of their shops, and then around the high street outside, and ask yourself:

What business are they in today?

Who's their real competition?

And most importantly: *"What is it that they do better than their competition that keeps customers coming back?"*

Like many others, our local branch stocks a wide range of books, magazines, computer games, birthday cards etc etc. But in all of those sectors there's a specialist retailer a few yards away with a wider choice. Or there's the local supermarket.

And as if that's not bad enough, the internet has turned letter writing into a dying art and is cutting chunks out of newspaper sales. Hence the profit warnings.

Hindsight is a great thing, and what has happened to WH Smith has happened to many other companies. But it's a great lesson for marketing any business. If you have a few minutes thinking time away from the day to day pressures of the business over



the holiday season, why not take the pulse of your own firm?

Think Dyson - is your big idea still simple, clear and appealing to customers and different from the competition?

Think Rolex - makers of timepieces or a fashion icon? - What are your customers really buying from you?

Think Tesco - who is - or could be - your competition in its widest sense? How could you build your brand to be a winner as times change? Or even create the change yourself?

Perhaps if some of William Henry's successors had taken a step back from their own business, WH Smith would now be one of the major brands of the internet rather than the high street.