



King-size packs dominate the candy sets at Sam's Club.

Identifying with business members and their objectives, Sam's Club Senior Buyer Jamal Parker focuses on fulfilling the value proposition.

Parker Manages Member Needs

"We see ourselves as buying agents for our members," Jamal Parker tells **Candy & Snack TODAY**. "My goal is always the same: to better serve the member."

For the Sam's Club candy and snacks senior buyer, that involves seeing things from the members' perspective and acting in their interest. Parker notes that there have been challenges for small businesses with limited resources as a result of the recent recession. As buying agents for the members, he explains, his team's mission is to secure prices on a number of items and find ways to make better use of members' time and help them purchase more efficiently.

Spending time in the clubs is central to Parker's approach. "A great way to understand and engage our members is to look at their baskets and discuss with them what they want and how we can help them," he says. "I try to

do that as often as I can — it's a constant education for me." Parker explains that because the most important part of the buyers' work occurs in the clubs, his team spends considerable time in the field.

Not only is Parker responsible for delivering innovative solutions for business resellers, small business and vending members; he's also accountable for purchasing and merchandising candy and snacks for all 610 Sam's Clubs in the U.S. He's what he says he aspired to be — a buyer for an organization he has long admired, and one in which five family members thrived in roles ranging from store operator to government relations, as well as international positions.

Working for one of the largest retailers in the U.S., which claimed annual revenue of \$56 billion for 2012 and has 47 million members

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JAMAL PARKER
Sam's Club

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nationwide, appealed to Parker: "I was attracted by the wide range of career opportunities, especially for buyers."

After three years playing on the ATP World Tour pro tennis circuit, Parker, a graduate of the University of Illinois, joined the Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. division in 2006 as manager of operations in Springfield, MO. One year later, he moved to assistant buyer of candy and snacks, then buyer. He was promoted to senior buyer three years ago.

Delivering Value Tops Priorities

Value, innovation and packaging are of critical importance to member resellers and guide every decision Parker and his team make, he says. "Our brand promise is 'Savings Made

Simple,' and as a buyer this is constantly on my mind and something I know I have to deliver on. Price with quality equals value, and we want to provide our members with great quality items at an exceptional value," he explains to **Candy & Snack TODAY**.

Top national brands in larger pack formats occupy the majority of Sam's Club's candy and snack sets. Parker and his team track product performance through market research and analysis as well as industry relationships. Assortments are adjusted accordingly.

Crackers, chips and meat snacks represent the fastest growing segment in the business snacks category within the past five years, Parker reports.

In addition, he notes, sales of king size chocolate and sour non-chocolate items have been strong. "The value [in a king-size pack] is

great," Parker says, "You're getting a larger amount of product for a good price. That trend is strong across all channels." He adds impulse purchases of larger packs are growing, regardless of the item featured.

However, he explains, while much sales data are available for popular SKUs, new items have to justify the space they occupy and be productive. "We sit down with the supplier and ask: 'How are you going to support that product to make it successful? What are you going to do for it?'" Parker says.

Product launches are supported with print, email and social media messages to members. "It's all about awareness — we want them to know there's new merchandise they might be interested in, and we send them information about how it might benefit them," he tells **Candy & Snack TODAY**.

Overall, new items such as chocolate 10 packs continue to draw new people to the category in different ways, Parker says, noting the chain has been driving sales with sampling programs and demonstrations, particularly when information, recipes, nutritional data or solutions featuring the product are offered.

In addition, packaging is essential to a product's success with reseller members because how a product displays downstream determines its salability, Parker says. He explains: "Business members should be able to determine an item's value proposition in five seconds and within five feet. If an item doesn't effectively communicate the value proposition in that time frame and distance, Sam's Club will search for a better solution for our members."

Promotions, including supplier promotions, seasonal and impulse items, are featured on pallets at the front of clubs and on endcaps. Rotating features "keeps things fresh," he says.

Innovating To Excel

"Business resellers can be any size, and for all of them, time is money. Our goal is to try to help their operations save time and run more smoothly," Parker explains. Indeed, Sam's Club asserts that it serves nearly 600,000 small businesses every day — the majority of which have fewer than seven employees.

He says he's thoroughly committed to exceeding members' expectations in every possible way through cutting-edge service programs such as the truckload discount and member services, including the Fax 'n' Pull and Click 'n' Pull and the member rebate program. A large amount of Sam's Club sales are to business resellers, including concessioners, foodservice entrepreneurs, c-stores and offices, according to Parker.

Of the recognition he has received for his



Jamal Parker negotiates with suppliers to provide top-selling brands at attractive prices for c-store and small business resellers.



Parker samples products as a member of the Sweets & Snacks Expo's Most Innovative New Products Awards judging panel.

work, Parker says: "Buyer of the Year (2012) and Item Merchant of the Year (2013) are the two highest awards that a buyer can win at Sam's Club. To win both of these awards really is humbling and special, something that I will never forget."

One way Parker's team expedites shopping is by grouping pallets of items often purchased together — chips with salsa and similar c-store items, such as beverages.

Another is the Click 'n' Pull or Fax 'n' Pull service: Resellers who place orders before 5 pm by fax, online or through the free smartphone app can pick them up the following day. Business members can take advantage of exclusive early shopping hours, starting at 7 am, Monday through Saturday.

Members interested in larger quantities can purchase full or mixed truckloads for direct delivery, and Sam's Club offers a service that enables members to compare prices from other retailers. They also are eligible to earn cash rebates with large suppliers, according to Parker. In addition, through the company's Instant Savings program, members have access to a significant amount of savings on specific items, and suppliers benefit through increased sales of their items.

Guiding Members Toward Success

The candy and snack buying team regularly visits club stores and meets with members and operators to discuss business and what can be improved, Parker says.

His team also relies on trade shows, industry publications, business journals and regular discussions with peers and suppliers to stay current. Trade shows and conferences are particularly useful, Parker says, because of the abundant opportunities for making new contacts, meeting suppliers with strong regional items and finding new products.

"It's really great to have an industry event with a sharp focus on snacks and candy, where suppliers, buyers and industry representatives meet," he says of the Sweets & Snacks Expo where, this year, he served on the judging panel for the Most Innovative New Product Awards. "The tasting panel looked at more than 200 items, and I saw several that I wouldn't otherwise have had an opportunity to see. It was a great experience," Parker says.

Supplier collaboration is critical to delivering on the retailer's brand promise, and Parker cites Sam's Club Joint Business Planning as an example of a successful alliance. The two-year-old program is intended to differentiate product offerings according to members' demands and build partnerships with suppliers.

Collaboration is at the heart of Parker's

ongoing commitment to serving the members. "They're paying a fee to shop with us," he tells **Candy & Snack TODAY**. "They expect more from their membership, so it's imperative that we provide the very best of what they're looking for." **CST**

GETTING PERSONAL
JAMAL PARKER



Pets: Grace, a six-year-old Lab, and Lucy, a two-year-old German Shepherd

What was your first job? I was the operations manager at the Sam's Club in Springfield, MO.



What has been your greatest professional achievement? Winning the Sam's Club Buyer of the Year award in 2012.

The best part of my job is . . . the people I work with.

What's the first thing you do when you get home from work? Start dinner! I'm usually very hungry after leaving work.

JUST FOR FUN . . .

One thing people would be surprised to learn about me is . . . I played professional tennis for three years.

What's on your iPod? I like a lot of different genres. There's not one particular artist or type of music that I listen to. There's a lot to appreciate.

What are you most proud of? My family: They are my greatest inspiration.

What new technology are you embracing? I've been using Voxer a little bit. It's a very interesting app.

What's one thing you do to make the world a better place? I volunteer as much as I can and I try to get the people I work with to [do so] also.



JAMAL'S FAVORITE . . .

Movie: *The Shawshank Redemption*

Actor: Samuel L. Jackson

Hobby: Sports

Sports Team: Pittsburgh Steelers

TV Program: *60 Minutes*

Meal: Indian

Cause/Charity: The North West Arkansas Food Bank and Helping Hands

