

Will work for food

In case you didn't know, A&P's Dominion is "fresh obsessed." They promote themselves as having the freshest meat, produce and bakery and have flourished luring customers into their stores with the "We're Fresh Obsessed" slogan. Now, A&P has gone one step farther. It guarantees the freshness of all products.

The company's well-publicized "It's Fresh or It's Free" marketing campaign promises all customers who find a product that's not fresh—past its best-before date—will get a free fresh replacement.

It seems like a noble idea, since today's consumer is munching more fruits, vegetables, meats and deli items and is more worried about food safety. Plus, most consumers expect to buy fresh foods from their grocer. But what's extraordinary about the promotion is that it works in more ways than one.

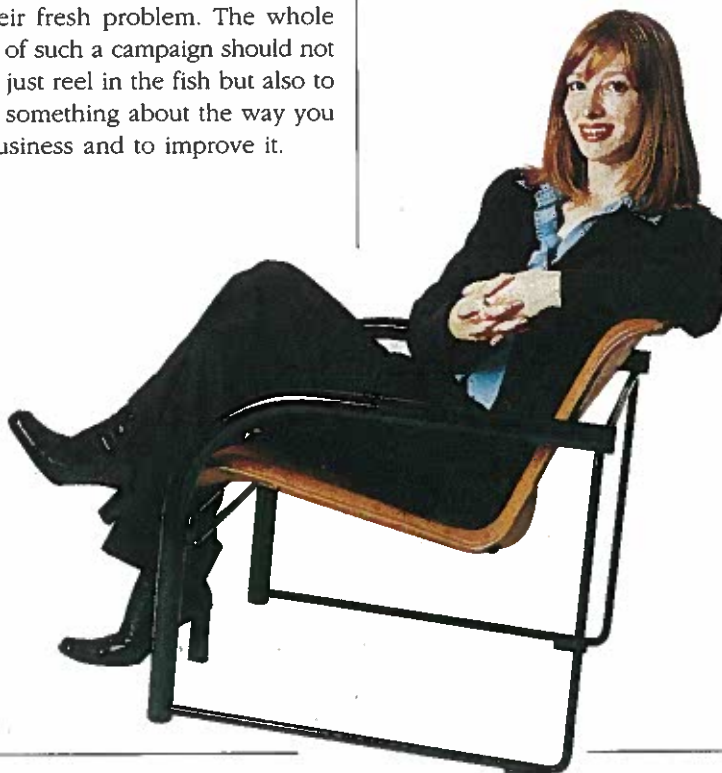
For example, the *Toronto Star* recently ran a story about a fresh-obsessed gentleman who shops at A&P stores. He's so obsessed that he travels to A&P and Dominion stores throughout the Greater Toronto Area in search of fresh products or, rather, in search of stale products so that he can get fresh product for free. Mr. Opportunist claimed he has received approximately \$700 worth of free product in the last few months.

How fresh is that? A&P has inadvertently recruited the least expensive quality assurance manager of all the Canadian grocery chains. Imagine paying someone just a few hundred bucks a month rather than \$60,000 a year. Soon you could be promoting the cleanliness of your store. You could start ousting the maintenance workers with the help of a travelling Mrs. Neat. Besides, they usually come and go, costing recruitment money, and hassle you for flexible hours. I can see the sign now: "If you find a wet spot on our floor, we'll give you a free Bee mop." Or how about this: "First five customers to finish unloading the pallet will get a free bag of chips." It'll spell the end of stock boys. Aah, consumers working for their food. What a concept!

A&P started off on the right foot, but something went wrong when, after repeatedly getting visits from the same customer, they didn't examine their processes to find a solution to their fresh problem. The whole point of such a campaign should not be to just reel in the fish but also to learn something about the way you do business and to improve it.

Keeping track of the products that were stale—were given away—might indicate a pattern or a staffing problem. Was someone already alerted to the problem but failed to remove the items from the shelf? Is there a better documentation system you could implement to notify staff of products that will be past their best-before dates in a month, a week, a day?

It may not have been catastrophic to give one customer a whack of free product, but what happens if you don't improve your execution and the "It's Fresh or It's Free" promotion lures other customers? And what if they won't just settle for free groceries? What if they'll shop only where they can *always* find fresh food? Consumers shouldn't have to be the watchdog. There's something called quality control for that. ❧
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Magic in the makeup

know you prefer to keep secret the rituals of beauty that your wives perform before you head out for a night on the town. The tubes of bubble gum pink lipstick and wands of black mascara that your teenage daughters wave as if they contained transformational magic make you long for counter-spells. And a trip down the HABA aisle, while necessary, is avoided; you usually give the task of product placement to a junior clerk, preferably of the female persuasion.

The powders and potions make you queasy. You don't understand why women "waste" so much time in the face-altering act of makeup application—you prefer to think that women come about their beauty naturally, right? Is that why you neglect the HABA section?

As row upon row of pretty pastel pencils dwindle to reveal an empty shelf, you move another brand of eyeliner to fill the space. L'Oreal, Cover Girl, Maybelline: what's the difference? It's just interchangeable black kohl to you. You don't mind leaving the beauty aisle's merchandising displays, product demos and clean shelves to chance.

It's time to get more in touch with your feminine side. Well, at least with your female customers, who sometimes spend hours in the cosmetics departments of drugstores and department stores, trying to find the perfect "look" for their Saturday-night date. They follow with zeal the latest trends in the women's magazines you sell and then attempt to imitate the look of the moment as seen on

Halle Berry or Cindy Crawford.

Women take great pains to paint their faces just right—to accentuate the positive, while hiding the negative. And in taking the time to prepare themselves for an outing, women are creatures of habit. When they find something that works they stick to it.

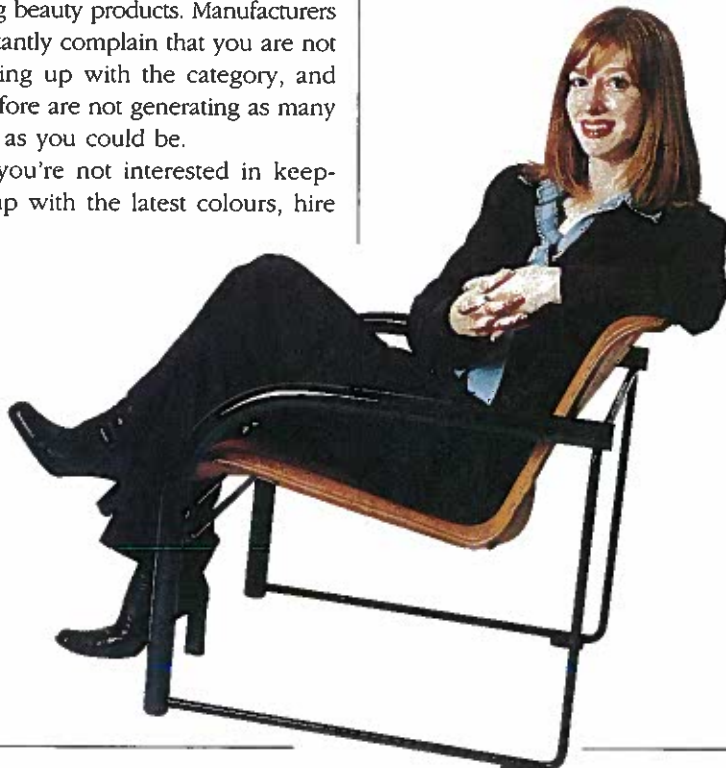
In buying beauty products, brand is queen. Relationships run deep. Once a woman has found just the right shade of fire-engine red lipstick and powder that matches her skin tone just so, she'll buy it for life. If she can't find her brand of mascara, she won't buy a different one from you. She'll go to the drugstore across the street, or across town for that matter.

Yes, you've figured out that there's magic in makeup, but you're not taking care of the category. Out-of-stocks, poor positioning and a lack of customer service plague most grocery HABA sections. It's clear that you don't, and aren't trying, to understand effective methods of merchandising beauty products. Manufacturers constantly complain that you are not keeping up with the category, and therefore are not generating as many sales as you could be.

If you're not interested in keeping up with the latest colours, hire

a cosmetician to service the department. She is trained to understand what these products do, for who and why. She can interact with women shoppers and ensure that the product moves. Work with the manufacturers to learn about product placement, brand building and category management—such as forecasting and replenishment.

A \$450 million category, delivering profit margins of 30%, it's no wonder there's money to be made from makeup, but you need a makeover of the way you handle the category first. A woman will form a beautiful relationship with the store where she purchases her makeup. If you can help make that happen, maybe you'll be lucky enough to start selling her that bubble gum pink lipstick and someday, in the distant future, sell her the anti-ageing cream she wants. That's a lot of beauty products over the years! ☛
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Do you know tofu like you know tuna?

I was recently educated in seaweed facial products, nondairy cheese in a pouch and everything under the sun that is grown organically, while at the Natural Products Expo East in Washington, D.C. The event attracts former hippies, er ... business people who run small family-owned health food stores the same way hedgehogs are attracted to small holes in the ground. And these natural product retailers are rather prickly about grocers' attempts to create natural and health food sections in their stores.

The litany goes like this: "Grocers," they say, "don't even believe in the products they sell in those sections. Grocers don't even know what many of those products are for, how to sell them and how to ensure the proper customer service. Grocers don't care about organic foods—reducing pesticide use and helping the environment. Grocers don't understand herbs and alternative therapies and don't care to understand. Grocers don't believe in the harmfulness of genetically modified foods."

Yet, grocers are stealing the category's consumers, they claim.

These comments made me think twice about purchasing health products in my neighbourhood supermarket. Are grocers just trying to make a quick buck on a growing trend? Can grocers provide the infor-

mation and guidance I require when making health food and natural product purchase decisions? I'm not sure.

But you'd have to be wandering underground, like Alice, not to know that the number of people seeking natural products is increasing rapidly. It's no longer a new-age micro fad. People want to live longer, fuller lives and believe that healthier products and remedies with natural or organic ingredients will help them achieve their goal. Yet every consumer I talk to echoes the same sentiment: "I'll buy multivitamins or something I'm familiar with at a supermarket, but if I have any questions about a health product I'm going to a specialty health store."

I can't blame them. The sad fact is that there are few supermarkets with natural product sections that actually employ a specialist to answer consumer questions.

Those of you who are simply adding myriad natural products, be it aromatherapy oils or soap made from oatmeal, into already too-small HABA sections, I'd ask, "why bother?" The product I've seen in these stores has quite obviously been there for some time—it's covered in

dust and will likely only move when it's time to sell it at half price, to clear the spot for something new.

If it's so convenient to buy everything in one place, why not invite health retailers to have a store within your store, similar to what Loblaw has done with wine boutiques and video stores? I don't mind going to a different store if that store offers exceptional customer service and knows its products intimately. I'd much rather shop for food at your grocery store than at Wal-Mart.

Trying to be something you're not doesn't work with the educated consumer. There's nothing wrong with innovation as long as you're willing to stand behind what you sell. Maybe the industry is not ready to don the health retailer uniform of hemp backpacks and Birkenstocks. However, there's still a chance to broaden your wardrobe beyond the traditional conservative blue. ☞

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