

What's in a name?

Loblaw goes back to No Name basics for no-frills ads

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Loblaws

During tough economic times, back-to-basics marketing reaches a fever pitch. But at a time when most corporate marketing budgets were whittled to the extreme, a campaign from grocery giant Loblaw Cos. for its No Name line of in-house consumer goods line virtually rewrote the genre of no-frills simplicity.

When the company relaunched its No Name line one year ago in the depths of the recession -- a happy coincidence in timing for Loblaw, as it had planned the brand revival for months -- it went back to the basic, bold packaging it used in 1978 when the line launched with just 16 products: a product name in black lowercase typeface against a lemon-yellow background. The packaging had no product shots.

The television ads from Loblaw's ad agency of record, Bensimon Byrne, are bringing that packaging to life, featuring scrolling black text against a blinding yellow backdrop to the strains of kitschy stock organ music.

"They are produced for a fraction of what a [standard] Canadian TV commercial costs," says David Rosenberg, creative director at Bensimon Byrne.

"There is no film, there are no actors." Since the brand relaunch, the agency has created 19 of the No Name spots.

"We don't have a single item under \$2," the text of one recent ad reads. "We have 300." The No Name insignia appears onscreen to close out the ad. That's it.

"[Loblaw] was looking to get back to [a message conveying] no gimmicks, no fakery -- just high-quality products at the lowest price possible," Mr. Rosenberg said. Another spot highlights Loblaw's money-back guarantee on No Name, aimed at encouraging customers to try the generic offering rather than a national brand alternative, and return the No Name version for a refund if they think it is sub-par. The ad jokes that the guarantee itself does not have a name -- "you just get your money back."

Loblaw's stripped-down branding is a departure from how the line was marketed in recent years. As No Name grew over the years from 16 staples to more than 2,900 products today, the line began to take on a look that resembled its flashier private-label sister, President's Choice. It featured pictures on the packaging, and while the bright yellow backdrop was usually present, the text was less obtrusive and

featured other colours in addition to black.

"Two years ago it was spectacular packaging, similar in many cases to what the national brands were offering," says Ian Gordon, senior vice-president of grocery at Loblaw.

But blending in was exactly what Loblaw needed to guard against -- with the bold packaging muted, the generic brand looked too much like its higher-priced rivals. "When you went into the frozen pizza aisle, you would have to hunt for [No Name pizza]," he said. Sold at a 25% lower price tag than comparative national brands, the brand appeals to consumers watching their wallets, but "the real impetus for this was about restoring the in-store distinctiveness of the packaging," Mr. Gordon said.

While No Name may be bread-and-butter basic, the desire to return it to its roots came from the top echelons of Loblaw. Allan Leighton, the company president, distinctly recalls coming into Loblaw stores 20 years ago, looking down the aisles and being impressed with the clarity of the yellow-and-black No Name brand, which made it stand out against the other products, Mr. Gordon said.

"That distinctiveness allows the consumer an easier shop -- they can readily identify the No Name brand."

Last advertised in 1990, the No Name relaunch comes at a time when consumers are returning in droves to generic brands. A survey out this week from Toronto-based marketing firm BrandSpark International says 61% of Canadians believe private-label brands are just as good as brand-name products, and 47% of Canadians say they have purchased an increased number of private-label products in the past year. In addition, rival retailers Sobeys and Metro have completely revamped their in-house brands in the past two years, offering a wide array of new products in eye-catching packaging.

"More Canadians are still buying private label versus premium brands as they perceive they offer extremely good value for money," said Robert Levy, the president of BrandSpark.

JoAnn Hines, a packaging consultant who specializes in consumer-product branding trends, said No Name's classic packaging reaches consumers "because [Loblaw] simplified the message: no bells and whistles, no complicated decision-making."

In the recession, she said, "we have seen a lot of people going back to their old standbys of comfort food, going back to the very basic, generic package that they associated with their childhood.

"It looks as though Loblaw really knows who the core shopper is for that line and they really understand that core customer. The packaging meets what the consumer is expecting."

So is the brand retrofit working? "Any time you change packaging

you get people who love it and people who don't love it much," Mr. Gordon said. "But the majority of customers believe the new packaging, whether they like it or not, really reflects what the brand is all about." And while he would not release specific sales figures, he said the retailer is "confident" the changes are making a "difference with customers, and we have research that would indicate it."

Bensimon Byrne executes all of Loblaw's ads, including the pop-art fashion pieces of Joe Fresh clothing line and those featuring Galen Weston, the executive chairman, as corporate pitchman, who extols the virtues of Loblaw initiatives and President's Choice products.

Mr. Rosenberg said while consumers may be more likely to turn to private-label goods when times are tough, fresh marketing ensures the message is relevant. "We have some research that shows that there has been a value shift in society, one that isn't as temporal as the recession, which has caused us to change our consumer-purchase patterns based on value, a focus on high quality for the best price possible."

And when it comes to private-brand marketing, "whether it's No Name or President's Choice, it's incredibly important to never rest on your laurels," he said. "That's the only way you stay a leader, especially with increased competition."

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