

Standing Out In A Crowd

By Elizabeth Howard

During difficult times, the most effective strategy in marketing is to take a nuts and bolts approach, or so the axiom goes. Giorgio Armani took this concept literally and mailed real nuts and bolts with the 10,000 invitations to the opening of its new Armani: A/X Exchange, which carries a lower-priced clothing line (jeans and cotton shirts) in New York. More than 300 people attended, and sales for the day registered more than \$220,000. While one might argue that this is Armani, couturier to high-profile celebrities and the "man of the moment" in fashion, this was a creative idea that attracted both media attention and in-store traffic.

American consumers will buy products if they are convinced to try them. But getting their attention comes first — which sounds simple but is actually one of the most critical problems facing retailers. The consumer has heard and seen it all, from the explosion of a space shuttle and the electronic war in the Middle East, to the word for word description of sex on the beach in the William Kennedy Smith trial.

Today's consumers -- men and women alike -- are wary of manufacturers' claims and promises about the life-enhancing properties of their various products. They are no longer letting fashion editors dictate the length and color of what they wear season to season, and it is currently unfashionable to "keep up with the Joneses."

Surveys identify customers

One of the first keys to developing a marketing program that will attract attention is to find out what potential customers are thinking and what they really want. Correct assumptions one month may be incorrect the next. Surveys, conducted on a regular basis, keep retailers informed about their customers and their lifestyles. The research also will provide insight into developing successful marketing concepts.

For example, Hit or Miss, a women's apparel chain, attempted to shift its merchandise focus last year from a casual-style to a career-oriented style, realizing later that its customers were not thinking about professional clothing but rather finding and keeping a job.

In-store career counseling seminars and a promotional effort arranged with an executive recruiting firm are marketing techniques that could



have been implemented to smooth the transition to the new customer base.

When Cirage, a new chain of factory-direct, updated women's clothing, opened stores in outlet malls in Chicago, Miami and Philadelphia, the store managers were asked to conduct individualized customer surveys. The results were used to plan regional marketing and advertising strategies. For example, the customer profile in two stores was in the 21- to 30-year-old age range, and at the third store, in the 41- to 50-year-old group. While the original intention was to advertise in *Vogue*, *Mademoiselle* and other magazines tar-

geted to the younger woman, the surveys revealed that *Cosmopolitan*, *Essence* and *Ebony* were better choices.

Uniqueness adds interest

Another hurdle that retailers need to overcome is sameness. Today, shopping in Chicago can be just like shopping in Los Angeles, Milwaukee or Miami. One of the fallouts of this trend is that tourists and traveling business executives (and more and more are women) do not bother to shop when they are traveling. Homogeneity is not attention-grabbing.

Yet, when shoppers discover a new store or recognize that a marketing concept is innovative, they take note. The Real Nancy Drew store in Chicago Place in Chicago is an eclectic collection of Nancy's own designs and are manufactured in her hometown of Niles, Mich. It sells clothing that, as an article in the *Detroit Free Press* recently pointed out, is "customized with streaks of paint, loud swatches of fabric, pink foam hair rollers, packages of Cheezits and Campbell's soup." In addition, there is a caveat at the entrance of the stores: "This Nancy Drew is real and has read all the little blue mystery books, but did not write them." Stores like this unique one keep shoppers' curiosities piqued.

Another approach retailers use to get attention, when they realize that traditional advertising is no longer effective, is targeted direct-mail campaigns. And because so many retailers have gotten on this promotion bandwagon, uniqueness is again the answer to standing out in the clutter.

Bendel's in New York has run two successful in-store events by sending invitations to members of the National Association for Female Executives,

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Stores like The Real Nancy Drew in Chicago attract attention because of their uniqueness.

the nation's largest businesswomen's organization. The retailer offered pre-approved store credit cards to guests at one event and coupons inviting a return visit at another, so that sales could be tracked. At the most recent NAFE/Bendel's event, *Women's Wear Daily* reported that the retailer registered sales of more than \$25,000 during the three-hour reception.

Conversely, The Gap takes a non-promotional approach. The focus here is on the clothing, which allows little confusion about what The Gap is.

The promotion budget is spent on a national advertising campaign that is notable, not because it is controversial but rather for its appeal to real people.

And some retailers succeed without advertising. One such example is The Body Shop. Anita Roddick established the identity of her stores through involvement with social issues, such as the environment. She opened her stores in the 1980s and was poised to seize the "back to the basics" trend

away from the conspicuous consumption that occurred during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Events attract shoppers

The doom and gloom about the state of the economy does not help entice people to shop, so it is important to organize events that make them smile and are a relief from the daily routine.

Stanley Marcus, who inherited Neiman-Marcus from his father and is often referred to as "the merchant prince," is recognized as one of the industry's most creative retailers. In the early 1950s, he turned his Dallas emporium, then a little-known department store, into a replica of the Faubourg St.-Honore in Paris. He also arranged promotions with the French Comite des Foires to coordinate events with the art museum, orchestra, theater and library in Dallas. He organized this "Fortnight" promotion to overcome the slow retail period that occurred between mid-October and the beginning of the Christmas season.

Good ideas, like classic clothing, do not grow old and outdated. They only get better. The key to attracting attention is not to be parochial and confined to the parameters of a store, mall or city. New approaches to proven techniques will help retailers get through to the sophisticated consumer.

