

Bounty Puts a New Spin on Spills

By Ellen Byron, WSJ.com, Feb. 17, 2009

The quicker picker-upper is getting a pick-me-up. This week, Bounty paper towels, made by Procter & Gamble, plans to unveil an ad campaign designed to reflect what P&G says is today's more cavalier attitude toward household messes.

For nearly 20 years, Bounty ads stuck to the theme of "Little Kids, Big Spills and Messes," usually featuring a child's messy mishaps, a mother's panicked gasp, and then a Bounty paper towel coming to the rescue. "There were tense moments about the spill, and Bounty was there to help resolve the tensions that she had," says Eric Higgs, P&G's Bounty brand manager.

Bounty's new marketing effort embraces the thrill of the spill. Centered on the phrase "Bring It," the ads depict a happy, relaxed mother cleaning up the mess from an erupting volcano she and her daughter have built in the kitchen as a science project.

"She's looking to be in a proactive role [rather] than a reactive role," Mr. Higgs says. Bounty's ads focus on mothers because women make up the majority of the brand's consumers, he says.

P&G researchers, studying the attitudes of mothers for nearly five years, concluded that today's Bounty users are more relaxed about household spills, or at least aspire to be calmer about them. "Most moms really want to be that mom who says 'bring it,'" says David Corr, executive creative director for Publicis New York, the Publicis Groupe unit that created the ads.

Bounty's marketing push, which still employs its nearly 40-year-old "quicker picker-upper" slogan, comes as cash-strapped shoppers try to shrink their grocery bills, with many opting for less-expensive paper towels or none at all.

Spending on household towels and facial tissues is a little more discretionary than on some other products. "If you run out at home, it goes on the list, but if you're out of paycheck, it may wait until the next purchase cycle," said Thomas Falk, chief executive of Viva and Scott brand towel maker Kimberly-Clark, on a conference call last month. Even toilet-paper consumption is affected by belt-tightening as paychecks have to stretch further near the end of the month, Mr. Falk said. "They're going to be buying the smaller-count packs," he added.

Meanwhile, competition from private-label paper towels is intensifying. "It's a very vulnerable category," says Thom Blischok, president of consulting and innovation for market-research firm Information Resources Inc. "Differentiation [of name brands] today is about absorption and strength of the paper towel, and that may not be enough to keep people away from private-label towels."

Persuading shoppers to pay more for paper towels by adding or improving features is a tougher sell in a down economy, analysts say. "Consumers aren't moving away from paper towels, but they are moving down to less-expensive options," says Lynn Dornblaser, director of trend insights at market-research firm Mintel International. "They're not paying extra for the paper towels that are specially perforated, or have pretty designs, or even for the leading brand that has all this enhanced functionality."

So far, market-leading Bounty has held its own, bolstered by its bargain-priced Bounty Basic line, launched in 2004. P&G's U.S. paper-towel sales totaled \$1.08 billion last year, up 7.6% from the year before, while unit sales totaled 234 million in 2008, up 2.9%, according to Information Resources. Figures don't include sales data from Wal-Mart Stores or club stores.

Bounty's gains are in sharp contrast to the overall paper-towel category, which has lost unit sales for each of the past five years, shrinking 6.6% to 715.3 million in 2008. The sales value for the category increased 1.6% to \$2.38 billion.

P&G says its emphasis on the strength of Bounty's individual sheets has helped sway consumers seeking value, especially with ads touting how a sheet can be reused for multiple jobs. Indeed, the new Bounty ads ask, "Why use more when you can use less?" and introduce an upgrade to the company's core Bounty paper towels, which now promise a 25% thicker sheet.

"You'll see a conversation about how one sheet keeps working, and one sheet of Bounty being compared to two sheets of a bargain brand," Mr. Higgs says. "We know from a consumer standpoint that's important to her."