



How to Market a Product That Doesn't Have a Niche

By BNET Contributor | October 29, 2010

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By Kathryn Hawkins

Five years ago, Austin-based restaurateur Sean O'Connor was experimenting with flavored whipped creams in his restaurant when he dreamt up an idea for a new product: organic pancake batter in a can. He couldn't believe that no one had thought of it before.

He spent the next year convincing investors to fund a food science lab, where researchers perfected the batter. He called it Batter Blaster, and when he met with supermarket CEOs to show off his invention, he was sure it would be bigger than Cheez Wiz. But they said they didn't care how innovative it was — they didn't want to sell it.

Grocers and their customers, it turned out, are predisposed to stick with the products they already know and love. "When you think about most retail purchases, it's about buying the latest shoes or car," says O'Connor, recalling his disappointment. "But if you go to the grocery store, you'll say, 'What meats and vegetables are on sale today?'"

To get Batter Blaster onto grocery store shelves and into consumers' refrigerators, O'Connor had to figure out how to introduce change to an industry that resists innovation.

Getting the product on the shelves

The first hurdle O'Connor had to cross was shelf placement. Most related food — oatmeal, cereal, dry pancake mixes — is displayed in the breakfast aisle. But Batter Blaster needed to be refrigerated.

He first tried to convince retailers to place his batter in the same section as refrigerated eggs. But they didn't want to take shelf space away from more proven products. "They'd say, 'I've never carried refrigerated pancakes,'" O'Connor remembers, "so I don't know how to judge how well the product is selling."

So O'Connor made the case that Batter Blaster would increase sales of syrup, butter and bacon, since they are commonly eaten with pancakes — at least in his house. That got him in the door.

Is the price right?

Once Batter Blaster finally made it onto grocery shelves, O'Connor encountered a new problem: He had no control over what retailers asked shoppers to pay for the product. He wanted to see it retail for \$3.99, but some grocers were listing each can for as much as \$5.99. "That's too much," says O'Connor. "It doesn't allow the consumer to just try it out on a whim."

O'Connor countered by printing coupons directly on the labels that consumers could use at the register. He also tracked and told grocers how well his product was selling at stores where it was priced lower.

Still, price and shelf placement were only half the battle. He still needed to get shoppers to notice the product.

Will they buy it?

Building consumer interest proved to be one of the company's biggest hurdles — and O'Connor knew first hand how difficult it can be to attract grocery shoppers to a new product. When he takes his two children shopping, he rarely manages to come back with everything on his list, let alone a new product he's never tried before.

O'Connor decided the best strategy was to take Batter Blaster to the streets through guerilla and grassroots promotions. Removing the product from the distraction-filled world of the grocery store gave families a better chance to sample the product.

Last year, O'Connor and his team road-tripped to Atlanta, where they set a Guinness World Record for cooking up the most pancakes in an eight-hour period. All told, they served 76,382 pancakes to hungry spectators, introducing Batter Blaster to thousands of new consumers and picking up press coverage all over the world.

Building a reputation

Today, Batter Blaster is in almost 15,000 stores across the country, including all Whole Foods Markets and Wal-Mart Super Centers. The company has 12 employees, and sells millions of cans each year across the United States, reaching approximately \$19.5 million in revenue for 2009. O'Connor is constantly working to develop the product in new markets and build the brand's national recognition.

Expanding the product line might help: Batter Blaster is beginning to branch out into new flavors, including chocolate, which can be used for dessert recipes, and a savory addition, hickory-smoked bacon. "The reason for the flavor line extension is to not only extend the product to other uses, but also to give us a little more of a billboard on grocery store shelves," says O'Connor.

Still, some people aren't quite sure what to make of Batter Blaster. Like the much-maligned Cheez Whiz, it's seen as a novelty. O'Connor has embraced this perception by marketing the product with retro-style ads and jingles. But he's also trying to fight the portrayal that convenience food is junk food.

Succeeding, he thinks, could open a whole new consumer base for his company.

Millennials — people born between 1981 and 2000 — are the most promising customers, says O'Connor, because they see convenience as a simple fact of life. "They've never seen a typewriter, they've never written a letter. For them, the answer to Batter Blaster is, 'Of course I would use that.'"