



THE TRUST FACTOR
In the "Family Values" campaign, S.C. Johnson plays on the double entendre of SCJ as a family company, referring to both its ownership and its customers.

VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

It may be hard to believe CEOs these days, but Sam Johnson's ads for S.C. Johnson resonate with an old-school honesty. The ad campaign is maverick, welcome and more prescient than any in mainstream media.

The past 20 years of unfettered laissez-faire, mergers-and-acquisitions-à-go-go business have left a profound mark on our culture, with fewer bosses controlling the fate of vastly more employees. Every mega-corporation with a PR department—i.e., all of them—espouses lofty “core principles,” to serve mankind at a reasonable price, blah blah blah. But the fact is, new owners upon new owners have basically adhered to a similar philosophy, namely, “realizing synergy.” That’s shorthand for maintaining the epidermis of a business—brands, advertising, shelf space—while gutting the body.

We have tasted the bitter fruit of this business model in the Great Corporate Meltdown of 2002. In the ensuing round of C-SPAN hearings, the chief executive officer, for 20 years fawned over in gossip

columns, financial news programs and the like, has woven a new stereotype: a Fifth Amendment-taking, buck-passing, hemming, hawing grafter. To add insult to injury, it’s all occurred in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, a time when Americans across the board had begun to expect more fundamentally responsible behavior from the business community. In this light, one might consider a top exec generally the last figure any company would want to thrust into the spotlight of advertising, short of issuing a mea culpa. And yet, abruptly, S.C. Johnson’s years-in-the-making ad campaign starring chairman emeritus Sam Johnson appears maverick, welcome and more prescient than any in mainstream media.

Indeed, S.C. Johnson, formerly JohnsonWax, would seem an unlikely entity to trot out the company/family patriarch.

Sure, it remains, against the tide, a private, “family company,” as ad tags for its various products state. And yet that broad array of household goods under the Fantastik, Saran and Edge brands, among others, doesn’t strike one as a portfolio easily tied together by ambitious umbrella advertising. But that is what the campaign has done, drawing a thick line from the company’s recent explosion of product innovation to a central, sturdy operating philosophy as espoused by Johnson.

In “Innovation,” Johnson, great grandson of the company’s founder and chief executive over the period of its greatest expansion, explains: “We wait until we’ve got a product that’s better than what’s out there, that the consumer can see the difference in. Then we’ll go to market. It’s a duty to our heritage and it’s a duty to our consumer.” The black-and-

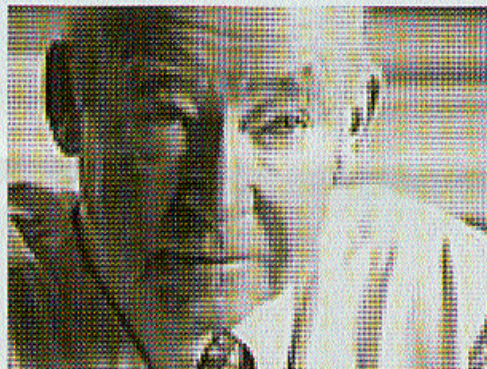
white interview-style testimonials trade off against shots of different products in use, Pledge Grab-It mop, Ziploc, etc. In another spot, "Family Values," Johnson emphasizes the double entendre of SCJ as a family company, with respect to both its ownership and its customers: "In many ways taking care of one's home is just like taking care of a family, and we've never lost sight of that."

We should qualify that the SCJ campaign is not one of those lyrical Wall Street-targeted Hallmark-card ads ADM, Monsanto and the financial giants run on the Sunday morning news shows. It began on network during prime time and moved to basic cable over the summer, all in family-friendly time slots, its mission "really Marketing 101, to communicate what makes us different, which is being who and what we are," says Cynthia Georgeson, director of worldwide corporate public affairs.

The company planned a shift to ads with just these themes when it changed its name from JohnsonWax in 1998 and began tagging all ads and packaging with "A Family Company." Although conceived prior to the ongoing scandals, the effort apprehended a creeping disconnect between consumers and the billowing conglomerates that market to them. When it broke the campaign late last year, SCJ cited its own research that showed 80 percent of Americans considered products from family-owned companies trustworthy, versus 43 percent who say the same of those from publicly traded companies.

The difference, Georgeson stresses, is that the "trust" factor builds up from a clarity of vision looking out over the long term, not simply the report to be shown to shareholders and analysts at the end of the quarter. Adherence to that vision has earned SCJ accolades for the Johnsons' longtime Fordist penchant for progressive employment policies and out-front eco-sustainable operations, and these could easily be considered assets for the SCJ brand. But, per Johnson's words, it is the innovation that culture nurtures—

such as extending Ziploc into microwavable storage plates, Glade into candles, Pledge into its easy-use Grab-It mops and wipes—that most immediately benefits



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its customer "family."

"When you've got five generations of family who have shared those same values and nurtured them, it doesn't change with the CEO," says Georgeson. "It isn't flavor of the month, or flavor of the quarter."

Indeed, the company is hardly oblivious to how the "trust" issue has become much more a lightning rod of public sentiment. More recent SCJ research, a sampling of 800 adults by New York-based Benenson Strategy Group, found that whereas 62 percent said their trust in large family companies has stayed the same during the recent scandals and 21 percent said their trust has decreased, only 33 percent said their trust has remained the same for public companies, while 61 percent said it has declined.

And that's not the half of it. According to a survey conducted by PR agency Golin/Harris in the wake of the Enron scandal, nearly 70 percent of 700 respondents said they will now "hold businesses to a higher standard in their behavior and communications." This past June, a follow-up poll of 200 found 62 percent thought CEOs weren't doing enough to restore trust in business; 37 percent said

the corporate crisis will get worse.

For SCJ's part, this is not just a matter of an ad that says the right thing at the right time. SCJ has done what few companies do in this age of Britney-for-Pepsi and Kobe-for-whatever—that is, draw connective tissue from the company's end-users, consumers, to its operational heart.

Interestingly, this fits what Golin/Harris has identified as a necessary evolution in communication: transparency. "Ethics, honesty, transparency—most of the time that stuff is presumed by consumers," says Mark Rozeen, svp-director of research at Golin/Harris. "Usually companies underestimate the knowledge and sophistication of consumers, and that becomes even more accentuated in environments where products are commoditized. The typical thinking is, 'We have to sell experience or association,' but not the basic quality or process that goes with the product or service. Now you're seeing the pendulum swing."

Georgeson's "Marketing 101" notion begins to look doubly apt. It speaks well for the old-school business that once vested so much in the "promise" of a brand as a reflection of the people behind it. Conglomerates pay lip service to such notions, but "people like Sam Johnson can 'get away with it,' because this is really the return to the notion of CEO as inventor, as opposed to a dealmaker," Rozeen says. "That's going to be more difficult for omnibus conglomerate brands to invoke."

In other words, the archaic concept of real value has once again been made vogue by the dubious alchemy of persistent Reagan-era accounting. S.C. Johnson might well be an oasis in the cesspool of Big Business.

Many companies in different categories will attempt to approximate the earnest entreaties of Sam Johnson and SCJ in coming months. Problem is, morality is not weighed in words, but in action. And teaching the new dogs of the Harvard Business and Wharton set old tricks will prove as difficult as floating new WorldCom stock. ■