

Putting a face to your supermarket's name

Brand ambassadors can help put a face to your store. But choosing the right person means more than just looking for a pretty smile

By Meagan Kashty | February 20, 2015

When you walk into the Laird Sobeys, a recently renovated Toronto store, the first thing you notice is the smiling face of celebrity chef Jamie Oliver on a bright orange poster near the carts.

Walk a few more steps through the produce section, and there's a rack of *Save with Jamie* cookbooks on display beside shelves of Oliver's line of olive oils and pasta sauces.



Having a brand ambassador isn't a new idea.

Popular Loblaw pitchman Dave Nichol, for example, became a household name. Nichol was credited with revolutionizing the food marketing world for appearing in ads, and introducing the Insider's Report in 1983, a flyer that told stories behind the products.

Having a person your customers can relate to can be incredibly effective.

"Ideally, you're building your brand on its own merits," says Patricia McQuillan, president of Toronto-based consulting firm Brand Matters. "But it can be really difficult to bring a brand to life without someone telling that story."

In the world of grocery, retailers can lower prices, broaden assortment and carry higher-quality products to set themselves apart.

READ: Sobeys partners with Jamie Oliver

But they can also have a distinct character associated with their store and operations, says Kenneth Wong, a marketing professor at Queen's University. "What you're seeing is an attempt to create an association with a consumer to show that they can trust [the retailer] for a certain quality of merchandise."

Research from consumer behaviour expert and Cornell University's Food and Brand Lab director, Brian Wansink, estimates the average person makes approximately 200 food-related decisions a day. And while market research from Sobeys shows 73% of Canadians say they'd like to eat better, many say they don't know how.

"People are getting hit over the head with healthy messages to the point where they don't know what to do anymore," says Jordan LeBel, a food marketing professor at Concordia University. "Consumers are looking for decision aids, and that's the role these brand ambassadors can play."

Jamie Oliver, says LeBel, works well for Sobeys because he's easily identifiable and shoppers like his authenticity.

In April, Sobeys launched a brand ambassador strategy specifically for IGA Quebec. IGA teamed up with three Quebec food celebrities as part of its "Joy of Eating Better" campaign.

Cartoon versions of the TV celebrities appear in all the retailer's ads. LeBel says the local strategy was a smart move. "If you don't relate to Jamie Oliver, there are three other chefs you can pick," he says.

READ: Sobeys introduces IGA ambassadors for Quebec

In Western Canada, Federated Co-op has recruited *Top Chef Canada* winner and Saskatoon resident Dale MacKay to its team. He contributes recipes and menu ideas, featuring local ingredients available at Co-op stores, on Coopfood.ca.

"[That's] a great example of trying to market something other than low prices," says Wong. "Their audience is strongest out west, so the one thing they can leverage against their national competitors is that local connection."

Celebrity chefs are more than just pretty faces as ambassadors. MacKay and Oliver, for example, work with in-store chefs to develop recipes and private label products. But having a CEO speak to the quality of a brand can work, too.

"Dave Nichol had this larger-than-life personality that would get him noticed, and he understood the importance of storytelling as a means of building trust," says Wong. "I think Loblaw is trying to do that again with [Galen G.] Weston," who is featured in the massive new "Crave More" campaign for President's Choice.

While it helps if a company's leader is charming, not everyone is born with Jamie Oliver's seemingly effortless on-camera pizzazz. "Fortunately, I think PC has so much going for them and they're doing so many other things that it doesn't matter as much if their frontperson isn't charismatic," says LeBel.

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Overwaitea Food Group is leaning heavily on the appeal of its president, Darrell Jones. The "About Darrell" section on Save-On-Foods' site has a video of Jones as he bags groceries for customers and sips coffee with locals.

"My first job was as a bag boy," Jones says in the video. "Thirty-seven years later, I'm the president of Save-On-Foods." He's also featured in radio spots and TV ads, and an illustration of him appears in Save-On-Foods flyers in a spot called "Darrell's Deals."

Although there's a strong case for using a brand ambassador to wave your store's flag to consumers, branding expert McQuillan advises not to leave your company's brand messaging in an ambassador's shadow.

While pitch people and executives can come and go, your message should always be the real star.