

The Shampoo Papers

I became convinced some years ago that in certain lines of business some people have figured out that certain tasks are best handled by centralization. For example, many of the so-called family restaurants in Chicagoland are owned by Greek people. All of their menus have the same appearance. They are laminated in plastic, have many pages of entrees, every salad has feta cheese in it, and whereas the "Specials" page in any non-Greek restaurant has maybe 7 items on it, a Greek Family Restaurant Specials page has as many as there are 12-point type lines on an 8 1/2 x 11 page. So it is clear to me that there is a Greek Restaurant Menu Central Committee that meets at least weekly to decide on specials for the week all over the Chicago area. It is quite possible that it is a national committee, but I can't test that very easily.

I have come to the conclusion that a similar sort of committee, the BTWB (Baffle Them With Bullshit) Committee, is responsible for all of the copy on all shampoo, conditioner and other hair product bottles. What tells me this, you ask?

My spouse is partial to salon-bought hair stuff. One shampoo she was buying was, I calculated, an order of magnitude or two more expensive than the stuff I was using at the time.

She now uses a different line of hair stuff, but still buys it only at the salon.

Long ago I developed the habit of reading no matter where I am, no matter what the circumstances. I often read shampoo bottles in the shower, only because carrying my copy of The Atlantic Monthly into the shower has proven so unsatisfying. My serious shampoo bottle reading started when I noticed that the "St. Ives" line (which I myself used at the time) repeated the word "Swiss" approximately 2,103 times on each bottle. This, of course, made the shampoo better. Not anything in the bottle that was actually Swiss. Just the word - oh, and the depiction, via a lovely and colorful decal, of a Swiss chalet.

In keeping up with my reading of late, I have been reading my wife's new shampoo and conditioner bottles. Of course, I carefully observe and respect the Warning! printed around the cap: "STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP PURCHASE ONLY! If found in a grocery, drug or discount store, product has been unethically diverted or stolen, and is void of any performance guarantee." NEVER would I unethically purchase such a product in a non-salon. What would I ever do if the product broke down? No guarantee? No, siree, not me.

Then I read that Rusk Sensories Moist Sunflower & Apricot Extract Shampoo "hydrates thirsty hair" (a phrase repeated in French, though the brand and the grain/fruit salad are not). The bottle then tells me that "rusk sensories moist [intentionally using the cuter full lower case] shampoo awakens the senses while gently cleansing and reviving dry, 'thirsty' hair. Specially formulated with vitamin and mineral rich sunflower extract to condition and apricot extract to moisturize and lubricate."

But here comes the real stroke of BTWBness: "all rusk sensories feature CFT (compressed formula technology) to enhance and expand the users [sic] sensory experience. Compressed formulas expand with the addition of water and gentle manipulation, releasing unique botanical/ozonic aromas as they transform their physical appearance for easy and thorough

distribution. Compressed formula technology achieves twice the performance using 30-50% less product."

Before we go any farther, let me list out the ingredients in the order in which they are listed on the bottle:

Water, ammonium lauryl sulfate, lauramide DEA, ammonium lauryl sulfosuccinate, cocamidopropyl betain, cocamide DEA, hydrolyzed wheat protein, honey, hydroxypropyl trimonium honey, apricot (*prunus armeniaca*) extract, sunflower (*helianthus annuus*) extract, panthenol, hydrolyzed starch hydrolysate, polyquaternium-7, fragrance, hydroxypropyl guar hydroxypropyltrimonium chloride, propylene glycol, benzophenone-4, citric acid, tetrasodium EDTA, sodium chloride, diazolidinyl urea, iodopropynyl butylcarbamate, D&C Red no. 33, FD&C yellow No. 6.

So: "Compressed Formula Technology" is it? "Enhancing and expanding the users sensory experience"? And they do this by "expanding with the addition of water and gentle manipulation"? Or, in other words, the product will suds up when your hair is wet and you rub? Silly me. I thought this was how all shampoos worked: wet your hair and rub, making nice foamy suds. But maybe I'm just missing something, such as how those compressed formulas in my dollop of 30% - 50% less product suddenly spring into fullness the very moment they hit my wet hair (if they can find it, but that's not what we're talking about here).

Not only that, how do those fine compressed formulas remain compressed in the bottle which contains as its chief ingredient (dare I say it?) water? Oh, and by the way, about all those ammonium lauryl and cocamide/cocamidopropyl thingies: every shampoo has those.

So let's get to the wheat and honey and sunflower and apricot. The sunflower is "vitamin and mineral rich sunflower extract to condition" and the apricot extract is there "to moisturize and lubricate." Unless the vitamins and minerals deposit themselves on top of the hair making it dirty again, the sunflower adds no value. And how in the world apricot moisturizes and lubricates is anyone's guess. Try rubbing an apricot in your hair, never mind soaking your hair in honey.

This copy is beautiful. And it is very similar in verbiage and tone to St. Ives's (obviously an inferior over-the-counter grocery store product, but it does smell nice and I love the Jojoba variety for what it does so Swissly and for its pinkness).

The rusk sensories story is even better when you read the Conditioner bottle, this one called "Calm" and containing guarana and ginger for a "60-second hair revive [sic]". This concoction also has CFT and ozonicity. But its stock in trade is quite different. It "instantly nurtures troubled, stressed hair." This includes, I think, depressed, borderline and sociopathic hair, hair that has deadlines it can't meet, and other hair in the throes of dysfunction. It costs \$8.95 for 13.5 oz, or about ten times what your grocery-store inexpensive varieties cost. Of course, those varieties contain mostly the same things, but don't have good copy on the labels (other than St. Ives, of course, but most of their copy is the word "Swiss", which is much cheaper copy to write).

The BTWB Committee for Shampoo and Conditioner Verbiage is, I have discovered, in Los Angeles. They write it all in English and use a Babelfish-like facility to translate certain parts of

labels into French (never any other language, because one wants to be careful to have that French cachet, the French being famous for hygiene). I am only guessing here, but I suspect that the use of French is not to provide for the needs of the 13 people in the United States who speak only French. It is another side of the BTWB phenomenon, in the same category as using the word "Swiss."

I am proud to have discovered these hair-raising conspiracies and invite all of you to speculate on other such centrally controlled phenomena. I can even suggest a couple. One might guess that all the ad agencies have created a single Mesa Committee to schedule who uses that one very tall mesa with a top about the size of an SUV to advertise, well, SUVs. There appears to be another such committee in Hollywood (with branches in each movie-making country) to schedule whose fruit stand will next be smashed by a careening car in a film.

It's up to you.

Ed McDevitt
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