

Noxzema: Take it off, but leave it on the shelf

At the risk of turning this column into a personal vehicle, I want to express my frustration with the disappearance of Noxzema shaving cream.

For almost 20 years, I have bought Noxzema Shave because it does exactly what it needs to do for a good price. No stinky smells, no rash-inducing additives.

If you recall, it was one of the most popular shaving creams of the 1960s and 1970s, sold by Baltimore-based Noxell Corp. At its height, it made advertising history with one of the most controversially advertised products in the country — its still-famous “take it all off” TV ad that featured striptease music.

When I started using it in the early 1980s, it was positioned as a premium product above cheap brands like Colgate and Barbasol.

But a few years ago, I noticed that new variations of the product were popping up, including an aloe vera variety. A new package design came along, too — sort of a check pattern on the familiar white can. Then the price dropped.

Somewhere along the line, I noticed that Proctor & Gamble had bought Noxell Corp. This, I thought, was good, because if P&G knows one thing, it knows how to market its products.

But last year I began to notice that Noxzema Shave was harder and harder to find. And last week, I ran out of it. There was no more of the regular variety on the shelves, anywhere.

I began to wonder what happened to this great American brand.

I went to the Noxzema and Proctor & Gamble Web sites, where I learned that the shave cream had been licensed to Los Angeles-based Universal Razor starting in April.

When I called Universal Razor, a receptionist said that there were “distribution problems.” She said it would be back on the shelves in a few months and referred me to a Web site where I could order it in the interim.

It amazed me to think that a brand so well known was near its deathbed. So I called George L. Bunting, grandson of Baltimore pharmacist George Avery Bunting, the inventor of Noxzema and founder of Noxell Corp.

George L. Bunting says that as a young brand manager, he worked to help move Noxzema Shave to the No. 2 position in the United States, a result of the super-sexy “take it all off” campaign.

Gradually, he says, the brand slipped, mostly due to price promotions by other brands like Edge. The family sold the company and he has not kept in touch since then. Still, he feels that connecting the shave cream to the venerable face cream worked well, as the face cream conferred authority on the shave brand.

“The skin cream had that halo,” says Bunting. Nevertheless, Bunting says that just because a

brand is popular and well known does not mean it has to survive — witness the once ubiquitous Burma-Shave, now gone.

To get a little insight into declining brands, I called expert Joel Baumwoll, president of New York City-based Baumwoll International Consulting. Baumwoll believes most brands can live forever, provided they are given a new twist or a changed marketing focus.

“There’s no such thing as a brand lifespan,” says Baumwoll, who worked years ago on the Gillette Foamy account for Grey Advertising when rival Edge came out.

Baumwoll does not fault P&G with the failure of Noxzema Shave. He says P&G has no other shave products, and even though there might have been steady profits, the returns on the shaving cream were apparently not as high as the returns on other Noxzema products.

Baumwoll says that in order for products to survive, they have to be big category leaders, premium-price niche products or price-promotional products. Big ad campaigns like the Noxzema shave campaign with Nordic model Gunilla Knutson aren’t enough.

Nevertheless, he says there is hope for us fans of Noxzema, especially if the brand is strong enough to sustain a premium price or can be reformulated and remarketed.

“[The key is to] give it a functional story and magic,” says Baumwoll.

I agree. Keep making it, but charge a bit more for it and sell it in fewer, more specialized locations. Train your loyal customers, like me, to know where to find it.

To promote it, don’t try to out-Gillette Gillette with sexy ads, coupons and mass TV advertising. Instead, think of it as a specialty product with a cult appeal. Capitalize on its other attributes, and use events and specialty promotions to connect with the next generation, which is nostalgic for all things from the ’70s.

Admittedly, Noxzema shave probably won’t ever hit the top tier of the American shaving market again. But it’s a good product with a proven pedigree and excellent history. It deserves another shot. **□**



Garland Pollard

INSIDE BUSINESS staff writer Garland Pollard reports on commercial real estate, transportation, retail, marketing and media. He can be reached at 343-4008, Ext. 302, or by e-mail at gpollard@pilotonline.com.