



Sea Change

BUILDING A BRAND for even a luxury item is no day at the beach. Imagine, then, the oceanic pitfalls awaiting anyone trying to brand a product that's viewed as a commodity. Sure, Howard Schultz transformed coffee-as-produce into coffee-as-lifestyle after his acquisition of Starbucks, in 1987. But he did so by embracing nearly everything about java, from cultivation to cup: he roasted his own beans and established an empire of retail stores with baristas and gleaming espresso machines, easy chairs, and light jazz wafting overhead.

But what if your commodity has a reputation for being too slippery to enclose? What if, by its very nature, it resists retail-store trappings and also lacks the marketing advantages of a central supply source: say, a pineapple plantation like Dole's or a smokehouse like Smithfield's? In other words, what if your commodity is seafood—a \$50-billion-a-year industry that's resisted the branding hooks of all but bottom-feeding tuna canners and fish-stick processors?

How, indeed, do you go about branding a product that, like meat, conjures up in the minds of consumers a distinctly generic picture: slabs of flesh displayed behind a spotless glass counter?

If you're Henry Lovejoy, 37, you try a low-overhead pure marketing play. Your niche concept: tap into a rising tide of concern over endangered fish populations by wholesaling only ecologically acceptable fare—that is, fish and shellfish harvested in sustainable fashion. Among the possible offerings: West Coast troll-caught albacore tuna, Oregon Dungeness crab, Ecuadorean longlined mahi-mahi, and Prince Edward Island rope-grown blue mussels. "We believe we've got a very captive audience of at least 13 million," says Lovejoy, citing surveys of consumer responsiveness to environmental concerns.

With no fishing boats, no aquaculture operation, and no processing plant, the business, which is based in Portsmouth, N.H., is banking on its first-ashore catchy name—**EcoFish Inc.**—and a splashy five-color logo to establish it as a trusted supplier of only good-for-the-planet seafood. A Seattle-based company supplies and processes most of Lovejoy's fish; it vacuum-packs six-ounce frozen fillets for natural-food stores. (EcoFish shrewdly downplays retail prices that are 10% to 20% higher than its competitors' by selling servings by the ounce, rather than by the pound.) The company also overnights fresh fish to high-profile restaurants like New York City's Oceana and Philadelphia's White Dog Café. The hope is that ecologically concerned, trendsetting restaurants will provide ancillary marketing by educating their customers with "green" menu descriptions. Imagine "potato-encrusted wild Alaskan longlined salmon" rather than "grilled salmon in a potato crust."

Lovejoy expects some chefs will also cite EcoFish by name in the manner that many already credit their beef tenderloins and lamb chops to Niman Ranch. "The ultimate test," he says, "will be if we're branded on the menus, even if only on the back, where a lot of restaurants tell their story and mention their suppliers."

John Grossmann



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