

Capturing a market

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With its golden rules, Roche Bros. fosters faithful food shoppers

By Ric Kahn, Globe Staff | December 7, 2008

At 8 p.m. on Tuesday, Sept. 30, the world as he knew it turned upside down.

Steve Garfield captured the momentous occasion with his iPhone, reporting in real time from the scene of the tumult: aisle 7 of the Roche Bros. supermarket in West Roxbury, where Garfield found himself in utter confusion while trying to make a routine shopping run.

As Garfield, an ace citizen journalist, spread his firsthand findings from the store to shoppers everywhere, he wondered: What in the name of Orville Redenbacher was the popcorn doing next to the pet food?

"Everything's changed!" he audiostreamed on one of his websites, www.offonatangent.com. "They moved the chips! They moved the juice! Everything's crazy! . . . I know the economy's bad. You've got a lot of issues that are bigger than figuring out where this stuff is in the supermarket. But why, when we're all concerned about if our banks are failing, do we have to go and relearn the whole format of the supermarket?"

Weeks later, as they huddled near the service area of Rochie's, store managers wondered: This is news?

Boston blogging doyen Adam Gaffin answered that question for the masses on one of his www.universalhub.com posts, entitled "Big breaking news in West Roxbury." He wrote: "Roche Bros. is changing the layout of its aisles - especially down by the frozen foods and ice cream. Oh, you laugh, but this is big news in West Roxbury."

And so it was that Garfield's affection for the store devolved into feelings of betrayal as he stood in aisle 7 on that late September evening. As he later explained in an interview, Garfield believed the ado in the aisles was a ploy by Roche Bros. to get shoppers to fill up their carts with more goodies as they searched up and down for their regular items. It is a sentiment shared by other shoppers, who had always felt that their beloved Rochie's was above this sort of corporate tomfoolery.

"Roche Bros. is like my supermarket," says Garfield, a Jamaica Plain resident.

The changes at Roche Bros. were not nefarious, store operators say. The aisles were rearranged, they say, to create added space to display more products, including organic offerings. The pet food and popcorn pairing was but a temporary one. As a helpful handout store map shows, the dog and cat food can now be found in their rightful place, in aisle 10 - near the paper towels, not the people food.

At a time when shopper loyalty seems as fickle as the next two-for-one sale, the fuss kicked up at 1800 Centre St. over mere floor plans shows the depth of people's allegiance to one local supermarket. More than 50 years after brothers Pat and Bud Roche opened the first store in Roslindale, the company now has 18 outlets in Massachusetts that employ more than 4,270 workers and generate in excess of \$530 million a year in sales. Multimillion-dollar enterprise it may be, but Roche Bros. retains the aura of a mom-and-pop.

That mixture is evident at the West Roxbury outpost, today the chain's only Boston address. The current venue there opened in 2002, replacing an older one in the neighborhood. On blogs and in newspaper articles, loyalists speak of the new Rochie's in terms normally reserved for a place of worship, not an establishment that sells sole. One shopper referred to it as a "Cathedral of Food." Another called it a "mecca."

In addition to its traditional mainstays, the market's more fanciful stock draws raves from regulars - like a prepared salad that includes mandarin orange slices, chopped bacon, caramelized onions, avocado slices, and pistachios. Yet a large part of the supermarket's attraction is its storied customer service.

While the economy's collapse has caused the supermarket's owners to do some belt-tightening - such as centralizing the production of some prepared foods - they say they won't compromise the Roche Bros. bread and butter.

"Family values and service to our customers," is how Rick Roche, 48-year-old son of Pat and current CEO and co-owner of the company, defines that core principle.

Such an attitude, even during penny-pinching periods, can bode well for the business, according to one marketing specialist, who explains that supermarket loyalty can be based more on homestyle ideals than price-per-unit deals. Thus, while Roche Bros. says it remains competitive dollar-wise with other mainstream supermarkets, its customer base may be less likely to go searching for cheaper alternatives in hard times, the specialist says.

"The decision to behave positively toward one service provider is far more emotional than rational," says Robert Passikoff, founder and president of Brand Keys, a marketing research firm.

As Roche Bros. works to keep up with the times - offering online shopping, for example - the modern mondo 46,000-square-foot West Roxbury store somehow retains an inner '50s feel, a kind of Disney-meets-Earthbound-Organic-Raisins world.

During orientation, new employees are schooled in the Roche Bros. way, a guiding code called the "Golden Principles." Employees are expected to keep a copy of the list on them at work, managers say, as it is considered part of their uniform - along with a maroon-themed company smock/apron and tie.

Principle Number 4 describes what to do when a shopper can't find a certain something: "Take the customer to the item she/he is looking for or find someone who can. Never point." It's the first of the 10 golden principles, however, that sets the tone: "Make direct eye contact, smile and greet every customer you come in contact with."

Those happy faces are apparently not a plastic put-on. Despite an investigation by the US Department of Labor that the company had violated overtime rules in 2005 and 2006 (the chain agreed last year to pay 687 employees \$283,183 in back wages), the Roche Bros. group recently was ranked 26th in the Boston Globe 100's Top Places to Work.

Ali Shehi, 67, was an engineer in Albania. Now he bags groceries at Roche Bros. in West Roxbury. "Me like working here," says Shehi, who points out that he has improved his English while talking to customers during his five years at Roche's. Like the other service clerks there, Shehi offers to help load shoppers' bundles into their cars, a specialty touted by adherents.

Or at least most of them. In an online forum, one Roslindale shopper praised the store's variety and prices but panned the hands-on approach, noting: "It makes me uncomfortable when they try to bring my groceries to the car. I got it. The parking lot is a nightmare, it's really small and doubles as a meeting place for the local chapter of Morons in a Lexus."

The company's down-home philosophy extends beyond the store borders. Roche Bros. gives to church and synagogue, senior center and youth league. Nearby sits the Roche Family Community Center.

Longtime Roche Bros. habitue Mary Mulvey Jacobson says she doesn't mind occasionally spending a bit more for a product there because she knows where the money is going: back to the community. "I feel a tremendous sense of loyalty to them," says Mulvey Jacobson, president of the West Roxbury Business and Professional Association.

Not all customers are so understanding about sometimes digging deeper into their wallets for select items. One West Roxbury resident - a self-described former employee - wrote in an online review: "This is the place to come if you don't know what else to do with your money."

Mulvey Jacobson, 54, though, has been faithfully going to Roche Bros. since she accompanied her father there as a child. When she was at the store on a recent visit, a veteran bagger remembered from previous visits that she had two young nephews, and gave her coloring books for them. "It's a real homey place," says Mulvey Jacobson, who lives in Jamaica Plain. "People recognize you and treat you well."

Her sister, Helen Connors, is still a Roche Bros. West Roxbury devotee even though she now lives in Chestnut Hill. The white wrapping paper in the meat department reminds Connors of when her father used to sidle up to the old butcher counter and order half a cow for their family of 10. "That's where my car takes me," says Connors, 51, a business analyst for the state Department of Revenue.

A third sister, Maggie Kelly, also heads to that Roche Bros. at least once a week, taking the 15-minute-or-so ride from Dedham. "We're total Roche Bros. groupies," says Kelly, 42, a nurse. "Their customer service is so awesome."

On recent visits over several days, the supermarket hums with a hyperactivity that seems to unfold in slow motion.

A guy in a white butcher's apron says to a mother with a young child: "Oh, he's getting big now." A clerk in one of the aisles hears a customer whistling and proceeds to tell her about her own family's whistling habits. The checkout lines are minimal as the cashiers methodically usher in the next shopping carts. The carts have cages that sit higher than typical ones, preventing customers from injuring their shoulders as they reach in to, say, retrieve stray grapefruit. The cages also unhinge from the front and flatten, allowing the employees to scoop the items onto the conveyer belt themselves.

On a floor that seems as polished as the produce department's apples, three small blueberries suddenly bound from nowhere, and appear to burst into break dancing. Before they get too far, a blond employee swoops in to collect them.

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