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THE MEDIUM

Produce Yourself

By VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN

NOT TOO LONG AGO I was on a panel about Internet advertising, and I had nothing to say. I listened blankly while the other panelists debated whether online ads were most effective in “prerolls,” which are ads that come up before videos start, or “overlays,” which are transparent banners that appear during videos.

Suddenly, a bright idea occurred to me. Really bright. As I was biding my time, I sincerely imagined I’d say this magical thing, and not only would it redeem my muteness, it would also turn up in Bartlett’s someday.

“Maybe advertisers should start selling different stuff,” I said.

The moderator shot me a look of scorn. “That doesn’t make sense,” he said. And he turned to someone else.

I still think of this and cringe. Sell different stuff? Advertisers don’t make what they sell!

And yet. I stand by a version of this. No business in the digital age is a single-widget outfit anymore. Every modern company, big or small, must now churn out not only the product or service that makes its name but also a so-called Web presence. From this digital outpost, the company attracts customers, takes orders, fields questions, conducts consumer research and, of course, advertises itself. But as these sites have become dense with video, audio, graphics and the apparatus of social networking, a strange transformation has begun. E-commerce sites — once little more than billboards, brochures or order forms — are now goods and services themselves.

Sometimes what is on a company’s Web site will become the company’s main attraction, as when the blogs or message boards of a magazine or newspaper site end up attracting more readers than the actual articles. Other times, a company’s whole online concept eclipses whatever else it purports to be selling.

FRESHDIRECT IS A perfect example. When it made its first delivery, in 2002, it promised to be New York City’s online grocer. But it has become something else. The site now offers recipes, diet tips, celebrity shopping lists, videos featuring [Cynthia Nixon](#) and [Spike Lee](#), reviews of produce, interviews with the house fishmonger and a photo feature on pretty wine-bottle labels. The site is, in effect, a magalog — a magazine from which things can be ordered. Like the magazines Domino (for housewares) and Lucky (for fashion), FreshDirect models a lifestyle — in this case, the foodie one — and makes it yours for the clicking.

People didn’t always turn to FreshDirect for all this. When the company started delivering in Brooklyn, the selling point was the convenience. My friend Lorraine told me it was a godsend. “You can’t believe what a hassle it is to shop for groceries when you have children,” she said. Like me, Lorraine doesn’t own a car. Unlike me, she’s a terrific cook. I asked if she was bothered that she wouldn’t be able to select the exact

apples or potatoes she wanted at FreshDirect. “I’m sure they’re fine. Who cares, anyway? I’ll do anything not to shop and carry the baby at the same time.”

The apples were fine, it turned out. Potatoes too. They were preselected by the FreshDirect curators, so they were probably more delectable than the ones I’d pick out using my own amateur criteria. In the beginning I thought about the company’s backend, the warehouses. Everything on the site looked glowy and shiny, but the items on the screen were (of course) not the ones that would come to my door. Did the imperative to exhibit fruit, vegetables and meat in regular grocery stores make them better or worse?

When my son was born in 2005, I found that Lorraine was right that the allure of FreshDirect was schlep elimination. For years now, I have kept a [FreshDirect.com](http://www.freshdirect.com) window open almost all the time on my laptop. Items gets hurled in the virtual cart willy-nilly, as they occur to me. Lately, I’ve noticed, more stuff occurs to me — artisanal this and that, organic stuff, Mexican entrees, carb-conscious tapas. These things just catch my eye, and I have a way of clicking through appetizing links. FreshDirect is simply a way of life now, not just a convenience but also a way of feeling leisurely, knowledgeable, gourmet, clever, taken care of.

Essentially, it’s a good exchange, as with any decent business. Shoppers give up aisles, carts, avocado-squeezing opportunities, butcher small talk and Warhol exhibitions of packages, while the grocer takes over the work of getting bags into the car, home, up the stairs and even into the kitchen.

But I have to admit inefficiency has crept in to my FreshDirect lifestyle. Though I can’t squeeze Charmin or chat with neighbors at the checkout, FreshDirect still permits me many ways to dawdle. The site’s interface was eventually jiggered to allow for what my friend Mike once (in an attempt to coin a “Sniglet”-style neologism) called “pleniplessence”: paralysis induced by the sight of how many kinds of detergent, say, exist on the shelves of the grocery store. Staring at FreshDirect, as its inventory has swelled, now regularly leaves me pleniplessed. But it’s not so much the number of things for sale that’s overwhelming these days; it’s the site’s dozens of options for sorting them. By cutting its deck of goods every which way, FreshDirect lets me find green and orange food, omega-3 food, four-minute food and cheese liked by someone named Ken. Celebrity emulation, weight-loss trends, color combining: help. My values collide. Lately I’ve cribbed straight from the celebrity lists, with mixed results. (I could probably have skipped the Giorgio mozzarella sticks on Spike Lee’s shopping list as well as Cynthia Nixon’s Pop-Tarts.)

Though FreshDirect deliberately stints on basics so as to sell more prepared foods, where the profit margin is better, it still offers fully 60 brands of breakfast food. If you’re looking to avoid pleniplessence — an affliction, by the way, that some people used to cite in Soviet days as the chief glory of American market capitalism — you can just order FreshDirect’s “popular items,” a handful of options at the top of every category’s page. As on many e-commerce sites, the popularity ranking exists to lure in conformist shoppers like me who rely on lazy logic: “If it’s good enough for other people, it’s good enough for me.”

I can’t tell if companies pay to be featured among the “popular items” of FreshDirect, as brands sometimes pay for front-table or end-of-aisle placement at other kinds of stores. They easily could. I have no idea. FreshDirect’s “popular items,” after all, make no claims to being the site’s “most popular” or — more alluring yet — “popular even before we were given top billing on this page.” Other sites, when they’re giving certain goods an extra sales push, call them “featured items,” and pages default to a list that prioritizes these items.

As much as chunk white albacore, kosher lamb and organic lemonade, then, what FreshDirect is selling is a new model of daily existence — one in which Megan and Josh Yogapants can issue esoteric commands from their keyboards and find them quickly and cheerfully fulfilled as if by latter-day butlers and valets. Devotees of the site, who are quoted under “testimonials,” reserve their most breathy superlatives for the FreshDirect “shopping experience” (as one fan puts it). “Takes the drudgery out of shopping,” one blurb has it. “I’ve been given new life!” says another.

With FreshDirect, the ultimate urban middle-class trudge — grocery shopping — becomes an opportunity to hand down judgments and orders from the home’s new position of authority: the couch. Underscoring her power and leisure, the FreshDirect shopper barely gets out of bed (Jason of the Lower East Side takes pride in shopping in pajamas) and disregards standard working hours (“Ordering late at night is the key ingredient,” writes Elaine of Tribeca). The new life that FreshDirect affords us, apparently, involves securing for ourselves certain Howard Hughes-like eccentricities — the way rich people do.

The FreshDirect life is much more gratifying than even crisp apples. Recently, as the site has amped up its offerings of recipes and partnerships with tastemakers like the magazine *Real Simple*, the Manhattan restaurant Rosa Mexicano and the chef Terrance Brennan, it has shed its modest claim to being a Web-based list of stuff you could order from a local supermarket. It now publishes cookbooks and sells tons of stuff with a FreshDirect label that’s not available anywhere else. Lately it calls itself “the nation’s leading online fresh food manufacturing and delivery service.”

THE IDEA THAT A COMPANY might do well to give away or discount what it purports to sell (music, say) and quietly just begin to sell something else (T-shirts, say) is one of the key notions of contemporary marketing — one the [Grateful Dead](#) used when they let fans make bootleg tapes of their shows while also making sure everyone left with plenty of band merchandise.

Is this kind of bait-and-switch, where consumers end up buying something they didn’t come for, something that FreshDirect set out to do? Presumably not. But accidental switcheroos are very much part of the phenomenon.

Consider the case of Steven Mendelson. I met him at yet another panel, and he taught me how a 2.0 merchant can readily slip from selling one thing to selling another, and if he’s flexible, that’s just what he should do. Mendelson is a former Hollywood executive who left the industry to develop movies, TV and online projects explicitly to the specifications of advertisers. After he explained a range of cool-sounding online-video projects, I asked which was the most lucrative. Was it a fiction series, a sporting event, a documentary? No way, Mendelson said: the company’s real sources of revenue were complex ways of leading would-be viewers to online television shows, using the information we all make available about ourselves when we live, work and shop online.

So what does Mendelson do now? What’s his job? Well, according to a recent blurb about Mendelson, one of his companies, BrandX, is “engaged in media and technology consulting, change management and broadband project implementation and marketing across social networks.” And another, Relevant Digital, is “a two-year-old semantic technology company with an advanced search, matching and meta-data mining platform.”

That all sounds weird. Certainly weirder than being a movie producer — or a grocer. But no weirder, maybe, than being a grocer-who-sells-grocery-shopping-as-a-lifestyle. Mendelson's grandmother probably has no idea what he does for a living. Nor do the grandmothers of the Web masterminds at FreshDirect, I suspect. Often people's wacko job descriptions these days reflect exactly the confusion or even obfuscation about what producers and consumers are buying, selling and getting free. A logjam in the language sometimes means something is stalled — and sometimes means a market is evolving. Give it a year, and we'll see what it means this time.

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Points of Entry

THIS WEEK'S RECOMMENDATIONS

NATIONWIDE PANTRIES: If you live in a FreshDirect zip code, you know FreshDirect.com. If you don't, it won't deliver to you. Other cities have services not exactly like it, but maybe as good. The others run grocery errands or delivery from existing supermarkets, employing expert squeezers to find you the right melons. Serving various territories and with a range of services, they include [Safeway.com](#), [Peapod.com](#), [Netgrocer.com](#) and [YourGrocer.com](#).

"SOLOJOKINESCENCE": The memory of a joke only you laughed at. Was it maybe not that funny? Somehow the Sniglet phenomenon came and went and left everyone remembering it as uncool, but there was some good stuff in Rich Hall's 1984 book, "Sniglets," about words that don't appear in the dictionary but should. (Heh heh, the '80s: "warbloid: the tiny device in cassette players that eats tapes.") It's out of print and unavailable on Amazon; look for a used copy on [Abebooks.com](#).

DRINK RESPONSIBLY: FreshDirect's new partnership with Union Square Wine and Spirits reminds me: the "Drunk History" people are in talks with HBO — for a comedy sketch show. Before they get too big and leave all their online fans in the dust, you should watch the hilarious "Drunk History, Vol. 4," in which an unsober human tells the tale of William Henry Harrison and his very short presidency. Find all the "Drunk History" episodes on [youtube.com/drunkhstory](#).

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