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The Buzz? Or, Perhaps, the Hype?

It amazes me that the old adage “What goes around comes around” applies in so many cases, both personally and professionally.

I’m writing this piece while in Palm Desert, Calif.; this is not relevant in any real sense other than it was while I was in Palm Desert in 2008 that I visited my first Fresh & Easy, shortly after it opened. My initial thoughts were: Who decided on this specific location (must be my lack of experience)? What did they see in it that I did not? Could they have done a better job in hiding (camouflaging) where it is in terms of physical positioning? And how could anyone view this as a critical portion of a formula for success?

Once I passed the location threshold (still not seeing what Tesco must have brilliantly seen), it was time to enter my very first Fresh & Easy. I knew this was going to be an experience beyond what I had ever previously witnessed in the realm of specialty retailing. I knew this was going to be not just a nail, but a spike in the coffin of U.S. convenience store retailing as we knew it. I knew that this was indeed going to be the path that must be taken by all others if they (such as U-Gas, Parker’s, Spinx, Wawa, etc.) were to successfully compete with this merchandising/marketing firestorm from Britain that had arrived on our shores.

I knew they were here to teach us the most important lesson of all: to finally learn from the all-knowing, all-telling, spiritual soothsayer of retailing (at every level) how to successfully serve our cus-

tomers in a proper, mindful way. The colonialists were finally being given the opportunity to properly recognize our failures before the end came—quickly and decisively.

Hyper-What?

How did I know all of this? Because that is what we were all told in the buzz leading up to this hyperactive waste of billions



of dollars. It’s just as we were told in the mid-1990s, that the retail petroleum world as we knew it was about to collapse because of the European “hypermarket” model being brought to the United States to gobble up the vast majority of gallons pumped in this country. We did not have a clue about to how to truly go to market in terms of our retail offerings. Yes, the sky was getting ready to fall, with a doomsday result.

Huh. How did we know that the hype was simply that? Where is that 35% to 40%—at least—market share the hypermarkets were going to easily capture today? We do believe it is roughly half of that amount, just as we knew it was going to be nearly two decades later.

By the way, will someone please define for me what an American hypermarket (based on that long-awaited European model) is and where I can find one to visit? I am still looking.

Peoria, not Peking

This is all so reminiscent of 2001, when we were told by the Great Retail Teacher from the North that its entry into the U.S. convenience industry would serve as the classroom to show us how to successfully merchandise and operate a convenience store, because we had not been doing a very good job of it since the 1960s. What is so funny is the simple fact that I have visited more than 200 of the Great Retail Teacher from the North’s facilities (both here and in the North); I have learned nothing that I had not seen successfully implemented in other locations.

However, why was I expecting to be blown away? Because I was told I would be. The buzz/hype/wow/whatever always precedes reality. Once reality comes, we know that the consistent truth of reality does matter the most.

So I sit here in Palm Desert in April 2013, having just seen the *CSP Daily News Flash* reporting that Fresh & Easy is going back across the pond. Who would have ever guessed? Everyone feels sure they can teach the United States how everything should be done in our own backyard. The only problem is, they have never done it. So much for the global forums of the world. Peoria is still Peoria, and not Peking. ■