



DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT

IT IS AN axiom in marketing that successful competition comes from doing something the competitors haven't thought of. Nowhere is this more apparent than in distribution. Often traditional distribution methods mean that customers who would like to buy are unable to do so because they cannot reach the particular outlets that the product is available from, or because they don't like the outlet for some reason.

Breaking the mold of distribution can mean getting nearer to the customers that other companies cannot reach—and it may even be possible to recruit a few customers who are currently being served adequately, but who would simply find another distribution route more convenient.

The idea

Avon Cosmetics entered a market that was traditionally served by large pharmacists, department stores, and hairdressers. For most women, this did not present a great problem—a shopping trip could easily include a cosmetics buying session in the local pharmacy, or a trip to the hairdresser's could be an opportunity to stock up on lipstick and mascara.

However, a significant number of women found it difficult to do this, either because they were housebound with small children or elderly parents, or because the stores were simply too far away. In addition, women often wanted to ask advice about cosmetics, and most pharmacies do not provide any kind of advice. Avon introduced the idea of taking the product to the customer through their door-to-

door service, delivering cosmetics to women and giving advice. The Avon representatives were themselves women looking to earn some money in their spare time, often neighbors of their customers, so that a visit from the Avon representative was a social event as well as a shopping opportunity.

Avon cosmetics are sold in refugee camps in the Middle East, in housing projects in New York, in leafy suburbs in Surrey, and even from canoes paddled up the Amazon. The company's sales are several times those of L'Oréal Cosmetics, and its products appear in some surprising purses. Incidentally, Avon has proved a hit with transvestites—being able to buy cosmetics in private, and importantly to have advice about cosmetics, is a major advantage for these people.

In practice

- Don't be put off by the fact that nobody else is doing it. This is an advantage!
- Be sure who your new target market will be. Are there people who are currently poorly served by the traditional approach?
- Be careful designing your new approach. You may not have a precedent to guide you.
- Look for precedents in other industries: you may be able to learn from them.