

Plum, the Color, Is Having Its Star Turn

Stuart Elliott

MADISON AVENUE is making like Little Jack Horner, pulling out plum after plum for the presumed delectation of consumers.



Plum is the hue of choice among several marketers, including American Express, which recently introduced a Plum Card for small business. Above, an ad for the Plum Card.

Examples of how plum may become the new black for advertisers and media companies include a new Plum Card from American Express, coupon inserts in Sunday newspapers under the RedPlum name and plum-colored labels for products like Penta water.

There is also Plum TV, a channel available in resort communities; PlumChoice Online, a PC services company; and even books by Janet Evanovich featuring a character called Stephanie Plum. The titles include "Plum Lovin' " and "Plum Lucky" and, coming in January, according to Dori Weintraub of St. Martin's Press, which publishes Ms. Evanovich, "Plum Spooky."

Trend watchers suggest several reasons so many marketers seem to be going plum loco. One recurring thought is that the success of technology brands like Apple and BlackBerry is giving fruit a good name, hence the proliferation of plums as well as brands like Pinkberry and Red Mango, which are both frozen yogurts.

Plum and purple colors also "evoke royalty, sophistication," said Tom Julian, president at the Tom Julian Group in New York, a brand consultancy.

Those shades can appeal to "the emotional side of one's passions and interests," he added, "the individual desire for zest and to be distinct."

Mr. Julian traces the growing appeal of plum to fall 2005, when "the 'luxe' factor emerged in the designer market" and richer hues came into favor.

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Plum TV was introduced a year earlier, in Nantucket, Mass., by Chris Glowacki and Tom Scott, and has since been expanded to upscale communities including Aspen, Colo., and the Hamptons.

"There's a positive connotation to the name: a plum job, a plum moment; it's something that's sweet and natural," said Richard Kirshenbaum, the co-chairman at Kirshenbaum Bond & Partners in New York, part of MDC Partners. He agreed last week to become the host of "Creative Lunch," a talk show that Plum TV is to introduce in the summer.

Mr. Scott, who also helped found Nantucket Nectars, received one of the first Plum Cards when American Express introduced them last September. The card is part of the American Express Open line of products aimed at small businesses.

"The plum job, the plum assignment — it's something you strive for," said Diego Scotti, vice president for global advertising at the American Express Company in New York. "We wanted to make the card feel aspirational, special."

"When we were looking at the color of the plastic" during the planning stages, "we wanted something classy and sophisticated," Mr. Scotti said, and the choice was a shade "we called burgundy."

But the company did not want to call it burgundy when marketing it, he added, for fear of confusion with wine brands. So instead plum is joining the ranks of Amex colors that also include black, blue, gold, green and platinum.

In December, three months after the Plum Card came out, Valassis Communications, which distributes cents-off coupons and other value offers for marketers, brought out RedPlum. The brand is in newspapers, online (redplum.com), in the mail, in stores and in circulars delivered to home and apartment doors.

"Consumers know our products, but didn't have any recognition of our business-to-business name" of Valassis, said Suzie Brown, chief marketing officer at the company's Los Angeles office.

"We wanted to create an umbrella name with superior consumer awareness," she added, that would "break away from the functional names in our space, which are all very literal: 'Coupons,' 'Savings' or 'Deal.' "

The word plum stemmed from discussions among Valassis executives, Ms. Brown said, who "like to talk about 'sweeten the deal,' 'sweeten your life' or 'juicy deal.' "

"In many societies, plums are given as rewards or as gifts," she added. "I like to think about biting into a big, juicy plum."

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The most recent arrival to the plum party is the Penta Water Company, which is reintroducing its Penta brand with plum-colored labels and packaging.

"Plum says calm; plum says clean; plum says health," said Bill Sickert, chief executive at Penta Water in Carlsbad, Calif.

"Other products in the water category are blue, clear, red," he added. "This color came out as a consistent representation of vitality, a pure product."

That several companies are all biting into the same name at the same time does not seem to concern them.

Ms. Brown said she was "delighted" to be introducing RedPlum as American Express brings out the Plum Card because "American Express has a much bigger budget for building consumer awareness."

And Mr. Glowacki of Plum TV said his company was flattered by the Plum Card's arrival. "I don't think there's any threat of confusion," he said. "I hope it's as good for them as it is for us."

In fact, Mr. Scotti of American Express said, the introduction of the Plum Card was successful: an initial release of 10,000 cards was all gone, he said, "and we're already in our second release."

Of course, not everyone agrees that plum is paramount. The Polo Ralph Lauren Corporation sent out e-mail messages on Thursday to shoppers that proclaimed, "What's hot now: Think pink."

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