

When plastic flowers ruled the earth

DO YOU remember the plastic daffodils? If you do, you were a sentient being 35 years ago. If you collected them, you were probably also a housewife and were thus part of one of the most successful soap powder promotions ever run. You were, by the way, a Persil user.

Len Hardy was chairman of Lever Brothers during the 1960s and 1970s, and was intimately involved in the endless soap powder wars between Lever and Procter & Gamble. He has written a book called *Ten Golden Rules: Business Management Strategy* (Windrush Books, pounds 15.99), which does not mention daffodils. But when bullied last week, he was prepared to reminisce about the great days of plastic flora.

Lever had millions of daffodils and tulips made in the Far East, and told shopkeepers to give one away with each pack of Persil. "Some people laughed at us," Mr Hardy says. "But many others lived in the middle of industrial cities, and would hardly ever see flowers. The promotion also had the great attraction that customers would come back time and again to collect a bunch."

Nowadays, he says, supermarkets would refuse to fiddle around with plastic flowers - but soap-powder marketing has otherwise changed remarkably little. "You had to get to the woman in Wigan," he says. "We'd always tell our advertising people not to produce ads that pleased their mates from college." That is why soap promotions were always straightforward - whether they involved free rail tickets or Persil girls knocking on doors and giving prizes to people who had a packet tucked away. It is also why telly ads featuring Leslie Crowther in a supermarket lasted so long. I knew there must be a reason.

Remarkably for a marketing man, Mr Hardy insists that clever selling is not enough - he has great faith in the housewife's ability to spot whether a soap powder really is better. And yes, it still is a housewife - Lever's research continues to show that very few men have ever bought the family Persil.

Independent – David Bowen – Sunday 29 October 1995