

Benjamin D. Hutchins
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Packaging/Retail Field Report
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Here we have the bit of the toiletries-and-whatnot aisle of a typical early-21st-century rural American supermarket that is devoted to toothpaste.



Fig. A Toothpaste in bewildering variety.

When I was a child in the 1970s, packaged toothpaste as we know it today was a relatively recent innovation (before it, people made their own by boiling animal carcasses with potash and lime). As such, there were only three kinds: Colgate, which was white and tasted nasty; Crest, which was blue and tasted worse; and Aim, which was not a paste at all but in fact an attractive green gel (but which my parents would never buy because they didn't trust a gel to have proper cleaning powers, so I don't know what it tasted like). Later, they were joined by a fourth, a composite paste *and* gel called Aqua-Fresh, which was so complicated and *avant-garde* that my mother deemed it a Communist plot. And that is basically where things stood for the next 20 years or so.

Now, however, the case is very much altered. (See Fig. A.)

The toothpaste section seen here spans about ten feet of an aisle section ten shelves high, intuitively situated between the toothbrushes (on the left) and first aid supplies (on the right) - thereby maintaining that critical separation between toothpaste and other products that come in a tube, such as Preparation H (which is in the next section to the right, on the other side of the first aid supplies). There is a distinct visual hierarchy here, in which the most ancient and powerful players in the toothpaste game, Colgate and Crest, are kept separated by a buffer zone of lesser brands, like the countries of the Warsaw Pact standing between Germany and the Soviet Union. However, the joke may be on the Great Old Ones here, as by accepting that centered buffer position, Sensodyne has managed to grab a sizeable chunk of that vital eye-level territory right in the middle of shelves two through four. Well played, Sensodyne! The other numerically significant interloper, Arm & Hammer, had to settle for a below-eye-level stripe of territory on shelves five through eight.

Also worth noting is the bias on the uppermost shelves toward teeth-whitening products. Toothpastes that advertise themselves as having whitening properties are hardly rare - it takes a bit of work to find one that doesn't, nowadays - but the Crest products in the purplish metallic foil boxes on shelves one and two have whitening as their primary function. The ones on shelf two appear to be whitening-specialized

toothpastes, while on the top shelf we find a much more expensive range of products labeled “whitestrips”, which I would assume are some kind of topical application device. (Over in the top left corner we also find the various flavors of Tom’s of Maine toothpaste, which are more expensive than mere mortal toothpastes for no readily evident reason). The range of whitening products is a bit startling, as is the expense of some of them. A person would think that white teeth were in some way *important*, seeing the weight placed on dental whitening in this display.

As for the bulk of the offerings, they rely on the distinctive liveries of their ancient brands to set them apart - as it was when I was young, the Colgate-Crest choice is essentially a religious one, since there is virtually nothing about the products themselves that recommends one over the other. Both have diversified in a frankly gratuitous fashion from their single-product origins, but particularly Crest; studies have shown that there is an individual sub-type of *Crest toothpaste alone* for every man, woman, and child on the planet Earth. The product range is simply mind-boggling. Sensitive. Whitening. Sensitive AND whitening. Whitening and tartar control. Clinical gum protection. Clinical gum protection plus whitening. Whitening plus any one of the manifold different varieties of Scope brand mouthwash (Crest makers Procter & Gamble, one of the biggest stuff-you-find-in-the-bathroom companies around, not missing a trick there). The display is dominated by this virtual sea of blue packages with a red C, against which Colgate’s white-lettered red stripe and slightly less insane level of variety fight a valiant but ultimately losing battle for the passer-by’s attention. Curved color lines and “splash” graphics are common on both sides of the debate and among the lesser brands as well, since associating the product with water is more or less inevitable under the circumstances.

Also playing the common-livery game are the offerings from Arm & Hammer, the company better known for selling baking soda (the emergency backup dentifrice of choice in my childhood, as it happens) in a distinctive orange box. Their toothpastes come in an orange box too (apart from the one for sensitive teeth, weirdly - maybe they’re trying to play on a closer resemblance to Sensodyne’s sober white packaging?), but punched up with some shiny foil, perhaps to try and put up more of a fight with Crest’s upscale metallic “3D White” line.

At last, down at the bottom (cut off on Fig. A, but see Fig. C), closest to the floor on the tenth shelf, we come to the vestiges and evolutionary throwbacks of the toothpaste world. These are products - the plain vanilla (well, not really vanilla - euch!) Colgate and Crest variants from when I was a kid, primarily - that are being kept in production solely for the unadventurous-old-people market, who refuse to buy any of those newfangled toothpastes that taste like anything other than cheap sugar-free breath mints and do anything other than scrub plaque off your teeth. Also down here, banished to the island of misfit toys, are my old nemesis Aim and another holdover from before the Flood, Pepsodent (one of those relict brands modern people are surprised to discover still exists).

Strangely, Aqua-Fresh seems to have disappeared from the picture at some point (as has Mentadent, which came in a high-tech pump gizmo and was the fancy-pants toothpaste of choice in the ‘90s, when everything had to be different). Then again, this is only a smallish rural supermarket, and so perhaps simply cannot afford to devote shelf space to more than the 90-odd(!) toothpaste varieties represented here. It’s entirely possible that the toothpaste aisles of big-city drug stores put this modest display to shame, featuring such a terrifying variety of products that anyone with even a moderate indecision or compulsion disorder can be paralyzed for *days* by the impossibility of finding the most recently purchased variant again, or of choosing a new one to try if it cannot be found.

Toothpaste Proliferation Diagram
(Millinocket, ME Hannaford)
2015/02/06

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22						
23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31					
32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40					
41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49					
50	51	52	53	54	55	56	57						
58	59	60	61	62	63	64	65						
66	67	68	69	70	71	72	73						
74	75	76	77	78	79	80	81	82	83				
84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91						

Fig. B Toothpaste Proliferation Diagram.

Key to Toothpaste Proliferation Diagram

SHELF 1

- 1 - Tom's of Maine Propolis & Myrrh(?)
- 2 - Tom's of Maine Antiplaque & Whitening
- 3 - Tom's of Maine Sensitive
- 4 - Sensodyne Mystery Product
- 5 - PlusWhite 5 Minute Kit
- 6 - PlusWhite 5 Minute Gel
- 7 - Rembrandt
- 8 - Crest 3D White Whitestrips Vivid
- 9 - Crest 3D White Whitestrips Gentle Routine
- 10 - Crest 3D White Whitestrips Glamorous White
- 11 - Crest 3D White Whitestrips Professional
- 12 - Crest 3D White Whitestrips Unstable Box
- 13 - Crest 3D White Whitestrips Flexfit
- 14 - Crest 3D White Glamorous White

SHELF 2

- 15 - Sensodyne Pronamel Dual Protection
- 16 - Sensodyne Pronamel Multi-Action
- 17 - Crest 3D White (smaller tube)
- 18 - Crest 3D White (larger tube)
- 19-21 - Crest 3D White Radiant Mint (various sizes)
- 22 - Crest 3D White Arctic Fresh

SHELF 3

- 23 - Healthy Accents Sensitive
- 24 - Sensodyne Full Protection
- 25 - Sensodyne Complete
- 26 - Crest Pro-Health Clinical Gum Protection
- 27-30 - Crest Pro-Health Whitening (various sizes)
- 31 - Crest Pro-Health Intensive Clean

SHELF 4

- 32 - Sensodyne Fresh Mint
- 33 - Healthy Accents Sensitive
- 34 - Sensodyne Fresh Impact
- 35 - Sensodyne Tartar Control
- 36 - Crest Pro-Health Sensitive
- 37-38 - Crest Pro-Health Clinical Gum Protection again
- 39 - Crest Pro-Health Healthy Fresh
- 40 - Crest Pro-Health Intensive Clean

SHELF 5

- 41 - Arm & Hammer AdvanceWhite 2-pack
- 42 - Crest Sensi-Relief Whitening
- 43 - Crest Sensi-Relief with Scope
- 44 - Crest Sensi-Repair & Prevent
- 45-49 - Crest Pro-Health

SHELF 6

- 50 - Arm & Hammer AdvanceWhite
- 51 - Arm & Hammer DentalCare Advance Cleaning
- 52 - Crest Complete Herbal Mint
- 53 - Crest Complete Cinnamon
- 54-57 - Crest Complete Scope

SHELF 7

- 58 - Arm & Hammer Complete Care plus Whitening
- 59 - Arm & Hammer Complete Care plus Strengthening
- 60-61 - Crest Complete Deep Clean
- 62 - NO PRODUCT
- 63 - Crest Complete Scope Dual Blast
- 64 - Crest Complete Scope Orange
- 65 - NO PRODUCT

SHELF 8

- 66 - Arm & Hammer Sensitive Whitening
- 67 - Arm & Hammer PeroxiCare
- 68-69 - Crest Complete Extra Whitening
- 70, 72-23 - Crest Complete Scope (again)
- 71 - Healthy Accents Whitening

SHELF 9

- 74 - Colgate Total
- 76 - Crest Tartar Protection Regular Paste
- 77 - Crest Tartar Protection Fresh Mint Gel
- 78-79 - Crest Baking Soda & Peroxide
- 80 - Crest Tartar Protection Whitening
- 81-83 - Crest Complete Scope (again!)

SHELF 10

- 84 - Colgate Sparkling White
- 85, 89-91 - Crest Cavity Protection
- 86 - Aim
- 87 - NO PRODUCT
- 88 - Pepsodent



Fig. C Composite photograph showing full height of toothpaste display.