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## K-Y Jelly, we hardly knew ye

The venerable lubricant with the kinky associations is getting a brand makeover. But will it be able to maintain market penetration?

By Lynn Harris

No one knows what it stands for, but everyone knows what it stands for. According to the K-Y [Web site](#), the initials "K-Y" -- trademarked in 1906 -- are a mystery even to the company that makes this bestselling line of "personal lubricants." Yet K-Y Jelly has become winkingly -- and not always invitingly -- synonymous with sex: sex requiring medical assistance, sex not endorsed by Sen. Rick Santorum. Despite its venerable, doctor-approved reputation, the frumpy aunt of all sex lubes still carries a high snicker factor.

K-Y is trying to change that. "Over the course of this summer you will see a lot of new things from us," says Danielle Devine, director of public relations for Personal Products Co., the division of Johnson & Johnson that manufactures and markets K-Y. "Our goal is to make the brand more mainstream. We're taking a little bit of the taboo off the brand. We're trying to have more fun with it."

Sure enough, K-Y goodies are no longer confined to that toothpaste old tube. New products include thicker UltraGel (in a handier soap-like dispenser), K-Y Liquid, and, raciest of all, K-Y Warming Liquid, which heats up on contact.

What's next, flavors? Well, sort of. A splashy event at New York's stylish W Hotel in June, featuring designer Patricia Field of "Sex and the City" wardrobe fame, is designed to highlight all of the *other* uses of K-Y Jelly.

*Other* uses? Yes. You've seen K-Y at your gyno's office or ultrasound lab, maybe even at your vet's. But did you know that it also works as lip gloss? Hair gel?

Those are just two of the "other" K-Y uses rumored to be in a forthcoming booklet -- debuting at the W □ that will list nearly 100 more. Devine insists that K-Y is not making this stuff up, not trying to manufacture an Avon Skin-So-Soft sensation. (That lotion turned out, quite by accident, to also be a bug repellent, a brass brightener, a floor wax and a dessert topping.) Indeed, [anecdotal reports](#) of handy household K-Y uses abound: removing rings, price tags and grease (for the latter, add sugar for light sanding effect); loosening of tight nuts (as in bolts); inserting keys into cold locks (also not a euphemism). It's often used by athletes such as runners and cyclists to prevent chafing, as well as by the two women in the movie [Old School](#) who compete in K-Y Jelly wrestling.

Why K-Y? Why now? The brand is still a Goliath with a 52 percent market share, compared with the 18 percent and 15 percent shares, respectively, of its closest competitors, Private Label and Astroglide. Nonetheless, perhaps K-Y is thinking ahead and trying to sex things up for the kids. In other words, the danger is that -- without an image update -- newer, younger lube-users might think of K-Y as the tube in their parents' nightstand, which is gross on so many levels. Time, indeed, for a makeover.

But can K-Y really change its know-them-anywhere blue and white stripes? If so, how? For one thing, experts say, K-Y could stand to lighten up. "The people in the new market they're probably going for are not people looking for 'a trusted brand for my intimacy needs,'" says John Carpenter, chief creative officer of Benchmark, a Cincinnati marketing communications agency. "The best way for K-Y to do a 180 would be to start using humor." What remains to be seen, then, is whether K-Y's loony lip gloss and hair gel-type approach will be considered funny "haha," or funny *strange*. (Or funny "There's Something About Mary," which is both.)

K-Y's competitors, not surprisingly, are thinking funny *strange*. "You walk into a nightclub, take out a big thing of K-Y and smear it on your mouth? What kind of message does that send? Your mama would slap you!" laughed Lynne Merrill, a spokesperson at Biofilm, makers of Astroglide.

Astroglide's inventor -- the founder and CEO of parent company Biofilm -- was more magnanimous. "I'm just pleased that [K-Y is] building market awareness. That's good because people who are involved in intimacy can enjoy themselves more. And it allows everyone to have more market penetration," says Daniel Wray, who after 10 years in the business can say "market penetration" with a straight face.

But if K-Y tarts things up, won't the company tarnish its "good" reputation? That's the challenge. "They are the old doctor brand, the medicinal brand," says Jennifer Murtell, Benchmark's senior copywriter. "The trick will be to get a sense of humor and keep that credibility."

Many people do use K-Y precisely because of its no-nonsense, hospital-approved aura. "Let's put it this way: it definitely would have given me pause if they'd used Astroglide on the ultrasound wand," says one New York mother.

"I'm more inclined to buy K-Y because it's tested better than most products," says a female New York sex writer. "I find Astroglide on par as far as quality. Wet, Eros, and Jack Off, on the other hand, are skeevier products that don't embarrass me, but make me worry about strange genital rashes."

Says an attorney from Toronto: "I am more likely to buy dowdy K-Y than its skankier Astroglidier counterparts -- but then again, I'm an uptight Canadian. There is a certain degree of embarrassment in purchasing any product that says 'I require assisted lubrication,' which is too much information to give the cashier who sells you Diet Coke every day. It's even less dignified if the box has a cheesy picture or big sparkly letters saying 'Astrogliiiiide!'" (She adds: "I've never used K-Y for anything else, but I bet it would be boss for calming frizz.")

For many people, of course, K-Y's unsexy medical connotation is precisely the problem. "He pulls out the K-Y, she thinks stirrups," says Jennifer Murtell of Benchmark.

And that's why some experts say K-Y would do to best to launch a whole new spinoff brand. "Creating a new brand would mean leaving behind some equity, but it would also mean shedding some baggage," says Laurel Sutton, a partner at Catchword, a brand-name development firm in Oakland, Calif.

"It's very difficult to change what you are," says Al Ries, chairman of Atlanta marketing firm Ries & Ries. "You've got two strategies that will work: one, change very little and wait for things to come back around -- which is what Hush Puppies did -- or two, introduce a new brand." Yes, with a new name, Ries says. He points out that professional builders shunned "Black and Decker Pro" tools (which they associated with the Home Depot set) until the name was changed to "De Walt," and that teens shunned "Levis' Tailored Classics" (which they associated with their parents' closets) until the name was changed to "Dockers."

Could a name change be all K-Y needs to prevent chafing? Possibly. "I hate K-Y Jelly and it's all there in the name. Why a K? Why a Y? It sounds so Jiffy Lube. No one wants to have that slimy jelly feeling reinforced by, say, the very tube you're staring at during a moment of passion," says a Manhattan financial writer. "I use Silk. Every time I pick it up I think, 'Aaah, *silk*. This feels *silky*! And whether it does or not, that's the beauty of branding. Brands make you believe."

Now, if they can just make pharmacy clerks believe *us*, when we try to call it cuticle softener.

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