

CATEGORY REPORT

By WALLY &
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The brass at Beatrice may be regretting the day they let Mary Anne Jackson go in the summer of 1986. Already, My Own Meals, the line of microwavable meals for kids that Jackson formed later that year to pay the bills and help out working mothers, has maneuvered its way into supermarkets throughout Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin (see "A M.O.M. For All Seasons," F&BM January, p. 12), and talks are underway for distribution throughout Ohio.

Jackson suspected she had a

Bucket, Campbell's Souper Combo, and Oscar Mayer's Zappetites are capitalizing on the convenience of microwave cooking for all ages and all lifestyles.

Spurring on this activity are the quickening pace of modern life and the dramatic change it has wrought on the family. According to the Census Bureau, the 5-to-13-year-old population will stay between 30 million and 34 million through the turn of the century. Yet there are more families with children. Double-income families already comprise 23% of all U.S. households, and their ranks are growing. Also, nearly 25% of all US families are headed by a single parent.

And by 1990, four in five US house-

holds," says Tom Kenney, vice president of Bohbot Communications, a New York-based media firm specializing in marketing to children. "Big companies are entering the market now because they don't want to lose their chance for market share down the road."

Startups like My Own Meals certainly have turned heads. Founder and president Mary Anne Jackson, herself a lousy working mother, created the five-menu line in her own image. The positioning is quick-fix dishes at reasonable prices—\$2.39 to \$2.99 each—fo-mothers on the go. The names are distinctly kid: Chicken, Please; My Kind of Chicken; My Turkey Meatballs; My Meatballs & Shells, and My Favorite

KID MEALS GO BIG-TIME

Microwave speed and safety has opened up a potential billion-dollar market in single-serve meals for kids.



Not child's play: Mary Anne Jackson was at the forefront of the kid food explosion with My Own Meals microwavable dinners.



moneymaker, but she didn't expect to spark a big-time subdivision within the crowding food business. Marketers large and small have spotted gold in the niche for good, hot meals toddlers to pre-teens can nuke safely in a flash. Hormel is testing a shelf-stable line of seven microwavable entrees, called Kid's Kitchen, in three cities while preparing for a national rollout in 1990. Banquet will soon be in the freezer case with Banquet's Kid Cuisine. Meanwhile, a New York-based startup company called Multi-Natural is testing frozen meals for toddlers.

Then there are other manufacturers that list kids as a target for microwavable prepared meals with broad appeal. Chef-Boy-Ar-Dee is expected to introduce a microwavable meal in a cup this summer. Meanwhile, Dial's Lunch

holds are expected to have microwave ovens. Where there's a microwave, there's a kid zapping his own food. And since microwaves cook for programmed times, kids tend to be allowed more access than to convection ovens—though My Own Meals' packaging, perhaps as a legal disclaimer, stresses the entrees are meant to be prepared by adults.

Some 84% of teenagers surveyed recently by *Forecast Magazine* said their families have microwaves, while 77% said they use the microwave every day. Often, it's for food they've bought themselves. In *Forecast's* survey, 86% said they influence buying decisions, while 82% said they shop for their own food at least once a week.

"Food companies realize this new generation makes purchases them-

Pasta. The packaging, which merited a Clio nomination for Chicago-based Wencel Hess Design, juxtaposes four-color product shots and illustrated silhouettes of a boy and a girl eating.

Jackson set a series of precedents for the category. She opted for a logo that looks like a kid's writing. She printed instructions on the package in English and in Spanish, and she paved the way for brand recognition by starting a club. A club card is printed on the inside of every package, and Jackson's informal research says kids are collecting and trading them actively.

My Own Meal's promotional program is as untraditional as the lifestyle of its customers. "Our best method is targeted direct-mail advertising," says Jackson. "We buy mailing lists of

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women with children aged two to eight in communities near the stores carrying our products. Direct mail provides a forum to tell people not only where to buy our product, but also to tell a little about the product line, its reason for being, price point, and where to find it in-store."

Jackson has also landed My Own Meals its very own spot on supermarket shelves. Her merchandising coup, though, leaves her with a burden of education. Consumers expect to find such prepared fare in the freezer case, and few understand the benefits of pouch packaging. To make sure she gets the point across, Jackson is backing up TV, radio, and magazine ads with an on-package letter ("Dear Fellow Mom...") extolling M.O.M.'s packaging benefits. Radio ads even plug the supermarket. One 60-second ad airing in several Midwestern states promotes M.O.M. for 30 seconds, then Dominick's supermarkets for 30 seconds.

Because "couponing is against the grain of a busy mother," Jackson uses refund offers and special trade promotions that stir up some excitement at the point of sale. She'll even accept mail

orders, a customer-convenience practice that accounts for a small percentage of sales.

Jackson raised eyebrows at Hormel right away. Now Hormel is test-marketing Kid's Kitchen in Indianapolis, Denver, and Phoenix. Like M.O.M., the key elements of appeal to Kid's Kitchen's seven entrees are nutrition, natural ingredients, and taste. But product manager William Bernardo says he doesn't want the "latchkey connotation" for his product that he believes M.O.M.'s has.

"It doesn't matter if a mother works or doesn't work, family lives are busy and fragmented," says Bernardo. "Kid's Kitchen can help fill a void by replacing snack food and candy, or other food that's not so good for the child. But what's more important, children are taking on responsibility at earlier ages, often involving food preparation, and this product allows them to make a nutritious meal safely."

Kid's Kitchen varieties include Spaghetti and Meatballs, Chicken Chow Mein, Chunky Vegetables and Beef, Beef Ravioli, Macaroni and Cheese, Macaroni and Chicken, and Spaghetti

Rings in Tomato Sauce. Packaging consists of a disposable serving bowl enclosed in a colorful printed sleeve that shows a photo of the entree. Preparation instructions are accompanied by detailed line drawings, making the product accessible to children as well as adults who have difficulty reading.

Hormel's going all-out to support the lead-market activity. Kid's Kitchen gets magazine ads in nine women's/family publications, 30-second TV spots in three-week flights, a full-page free-standing insert, and direct-mail.

Hormel is also borrowing from the competition. While ads are directed at the mother, kids are invited to take part in a Kid's Kitchen Club. Members get a newsletter, a membership card, a fabric patch, and a catalog of "great stuff at low prices." The more proofs of purchase members mail in with their orders, the deeper the discounts.

Hormel is also trading on a huge price gap. At \$1.09 to \$1.19 per entree, Kid's Kitchen is roughly half the price of M.O.M. for about the same amount of food. "Over the years, parents have relied on affordable foods for children: hotdogs, macaroni and cheese, peanut

butter and jelly," says Bernardo. "We felt we had to be priced attractively because we're competing with all the foods kids eat."

Any way Bernardo looks at it, kid's meals look like a billion-dollar category. He's already thinking beyond supermarkets and C-stores into distribution through mass merchandisers, vending machines in schools, even as hot lunches in daycare centers. "And how about airlines?" he muses. "Our meal would cost an airline about a dollar. What could they buy cheaper? Kids would enjoy it a lot more than some wild stuff on rice with sauce."

You'd think that kind of opportunity would entice every major food processor. But some big players are reluctant to gear product lines to kids for fear of limiting their potential market. Take Campbell Soup, which is winning raves for its Souper Combo microwavable meals, currently in test in Chicago.

"What's the long-term viability of a small niche?" asks William Piszek, marketing research manager at Campbell's Microwave Institute. "The kid area is a hot area, and Souper Combos are battling in that market for a piece of the pie. But you can come at the kid's market in many ways. We show kids in our commercials, show kids enjoying the product. They're being served by moms, eaten by kids. But we don't say it outright because that could limit us."

Campbell's answer is ingredients. Two new Souper Combos are Noodle-Os and hotdogs—broad-appeal fare that fits a kid's taste. And the company markets other foods kids love, such as Swanson frozen meals and Franco American canned foods. "We've looked at kid's frozen dinners umpteen times," says Campbell USA president Herb Baum. "The more you niche the market like that, the more you exclude a big portion of the population. The older kids get, the more they trade up, the less they want to be viewed as kids."

Campbell is also wary. "We've jumped too quickly in a couple of cases in the past," says Baum. "Now we're asking, 'Will the niche take hold? Will people pay for convenience? Will the product be perceived as a good value in and of itself?'"

There are plenty of marketers willing to prove it out. Lis Bensley, a mother and nutrition/cooking journalist, started marketing a four-product line of frozen microwavable meals (Pasta Rings with Cheese, Meatball and Pasta Shells, Chicken Barley Stew, and Turkey Tetrazzini) called Multi-Natural to small supermarkets and gourmet shops in New York City. After she evaluates the feedback on her packaging and pricing (\$2.39 to \$2.49 per entree), Bensley plans a rollout to similar stores along the East Coast this fall.

In this opportunity phase, one thing's certain about the kid's meals market: It's going to grow. By this time next year, store shelves are expected to be bursting with children's entrees. Eager onlookers like Herb Baum won't have to wait long for their answers. □