

Jackson: "I think we consumers have gone too far ... looking for quick fixes"

BOB'S COMMENT: *I've never met this lady, but I'm an admirer. What she's done in only a few short months to both promote and position "My Own Meals" line of kids' microwave meals into the marketplace is the sign of a great marketer. Naturally, I wanted to talk to Mary Anne.*

MESSENGER: Let's talk first about the shelf stable microwave foods category. How do you view its present state and its future?

MARY ANNE: A lot of people are coming in with products that come from another form of packaging. Basically, a canned good in a different packaging, and trying to pass itself off as something new.

But I think every company that comes in with a product really has an opportunity to create a new image, an awareness, and get people interested. I don't want my products to be like the rest, or products pretending to be something new to a category. I wanted to be different, and I think any company competing in this category should want the same thing.

MESSENGER: Well, I don't understand ... how is it that a little company like My Own Meals can be distinctive while the bigger companies, who also have bigger resources, are more prone to me-too their products than be innovative?

MARY ANNE: I don't have a bureaucracy to tie projects up. I worked for Beatrice, so I know what it's like to get excited about a project only to see it get lost in the different levels of management. We're very flexible and willing to try new approaches that bigger companies might not be capable of. Let me cite you an example.

When we first set up production, my production people said we can't - and I *hate* the word *can't* - do it without modified food starch. But I sat down with them and our r&d people and said, 'How did [manufacturers] do it before they had modified food starch?' Well, they used corn starch. I said, 'Aha! Do you think we could use corn starch?'

We now use corn starch.

Another thing that separates us from bigger companies, we are painstaking in using our label to tell consumers everything that goes into our products.

I'm concerned with what I'm seeing in the shelf-stable category. Everyone of us who plays in that category ought to do our part to make sure we don't try to overshadow our ingredients. We must put it all on the label! We must make sure our labels are clearly defined. I'm not saying perfectly clean, just clearly defined.

The other thing that concerns me is packaging. We have to have other benefits before the consumer will buy the product. I don't think packaging is as important as what you are providing to the consumer.



Mary Anne Jackson was known as a "go-getter" at Beatrice Foods with lots of great, and innovative, ideas. But she proved a bit too entrepreneurial for such a big (and then troubled) company, so she left to pursue her own business goals. She started My Own Meals, Inc., a rapidly-growing success story in the still-virgin shelf-stable category.

If you're providing them with a good product, are consistent in your methods, tell them exactly what they're getting, then I don't think they [consumers] care that much about packaging.

No, what we have to do, those of us competing in the shelf-stable category, is come out with better products.

MESSENGER: Are consumers really that smart today compared to days past? I mean, do they really put so much weight on what's in a product?

MARY ANNE: Well, let's think about it for a moment. How many people knew what their cholesterol levels were even five years ago?

The thing is, today's consumers are reading a lot more, they're more concerned. They know about cholesterol, about saturated and unsaturated fats, about the implications on children of too much sugar, MSG, artificial colors, and a number of other issues.

I'm not saying consumers today understand everything, but they're becoming more aware. They're questioning things more, and that's why we have a controversy now with some of the cereal manufacturers.

MESSENGER: It seems to me that consumers are very confused over the contradictions and controversies flying around the food industry.

MARY ANNE: Oh, they are indeed, I think consumers are very confused. They are getting too many conflicting messages all the time. What they read, what they hear, what they see, and what they don't see, on labels say. There's a lot of problems with that.

It aggravates me because we're working very closely with our ingredients suppliers to make certain we're doing things upfront for consumers. We want to be clear with consumers. But then I see other manufacturers doing just the opposite. I know what's in their products, how they're trying to confuse consumers, and it aggravates me.

But this conflict over ingredients, and how we present them on labels, has been going on for a long time. But now it's becoming more and more prominent because more and more people are writing about it, and so, more and more people are reading about it. Thus, the confusion escalates.

MESSENGER: What about oat bran, rice bran, and a lot of the other "hot" buzzwords reaching out to today's consumer?

MARY ANNE: To a certain degree, those (oat bran, rice bran, etc.) are fads. Part of the reasons they are fads is because of all the hype they get, you know, one big blow at a time.

Here at My Own Meals, we have a philosophy: Eat things in moderation and nothing's going to hurt you. Eat things in gross excess and you're asking for trouble.

We believe that kids are going to be kids and you should let them eat a good and wholesome meal, which includes some fats and sweets. It's not going to hurt them as long as it's done in moderation.

I think we consumers have gone too far to the side where we're looking for quick fixes. We think our cholesterol is too high, so what do we do? We eat oat bran. We eat, for example, things like oat bran muffins that are full of fats that we don't want. We'd have to eat a truckload of oat bran to compensate for the fat we get in the oat bran muffins that we're eating.

So I think some of this stuff, these fads, are going to start shaking out of the industry.

MESSENGER: The retail environment has changed. It takes a buck with a big bang just to get in the door, with no guarantee a product will get the time it needs to develop. How are you managing to secure shelf space at a time when shelf space seems at a minimum, especially when you haven't the money to compete with the major manufacturers?

MARY ANNE: We advertise on TV, radio, in print, and through direct mail. But we mainly work very hard on the grass roots level. We are a team here at My Own Meals, we're all working together to create new ideas and keep our company growing. There is no bureaucracy to slow us down. We deal on a very personal level with our retail customers, who end up wanting our products to succeed almost as much as we do.

That kind of cooperation is what's going to make My Own Meals succeed.

I want to say, we do have a point of difference in our products. I mean, we're not just another mustard, as I like to say. We're different and we're in a category that's beginning to receive a lot of attention as the wave of the future.

By itself, the shelf stable segment is not going to happen overnight. It's not one of the quick fixes I've been talking about, like oat bran.

So, in a way, it's easier for us to get a retailer's attention because we truly do have something unique.

MESSENGER: It sounds like you've got a perfect marriage with retailers. No problems at all?

MARY ANNE: Well, I keep reading that shelf-stable products require much less handling cost. Yet there are some retailers that want to take the same margins they take on frozen foods. So we have to sit down with them and talk it through, which I've done with a number of retailers.

You know, I believe that everyone should win, but nobody should win too much. If we let the retailers take horrendously high margins, that precludes us from accomplishing our objective of leading in on a lower price. I work very hard to reach accommodations with my customers. After all, if we don't have them, we don't have a business.

But we won't allow a retailer to put us in an adversarial position, where so many food companies operate from. We simply refuse to work with retailers who want to see us as the enemy instead of a company trying to create products their customers will purchase. We don't need to sell our products in 100% of the grocery stores in America, so we can be fussy, too. Thank goodness our customers just happen to be the key players in the markets where we compete. And we work very close with them.

MESSENGER: Let's talk about kids and the microwave. How did you get mothers to overcome their fear of "nuking" their kids for lunch or dinner?

MARY ANNE: Boy, you're the first one to ask me that question. You know, our research actually did tell us that there's a group of people out there who would never, quote, "nuke their kids," unquote. I don't remember the size or sampling of the survey, but that group does exist.

In fact, one woman wrote in and said, "Why are you going to make [My Own Meals] microwaveable? It's so uncaring. If I were you, just make it boil-able.

And our products are both microwaveable and boil-able. So, if you don't want to 'nuke' your kids, you have another option. That's the reason we chose the packaging we did.

Still, most people microwave it.

MESSENGER: What do kids like about My Own Meals?

MARY ANNE: The frozen dinner options, for the most part, don't taste good to kids. Of course, we now have hot dogs and hamburgers coming out in convenient form, but I don't know yet how those are profiling with kids. But the products that were there when we entered the market - Lean Cuisine, Budget Gourmet, etc. - none of those had flavor profiles that appealed to kids.