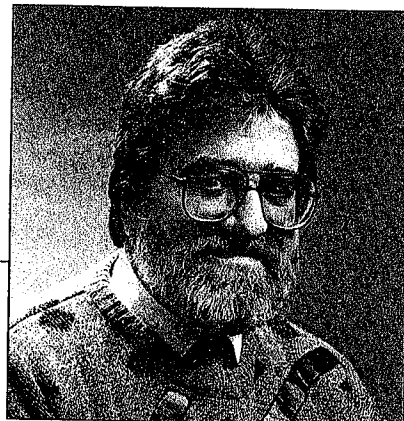


KIDS MEALS LOOM AS MEAN BATTLEGROUND

by Bob Messenger



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Kids meals have become a new and hotly contested battleground in the microwaveable dinners and entrees segment.

What started out as a small niche for a small company—My Own Meals Inc.—has recently drawn bigger players into the fray.

In fact, My Own Meals is now flanked by two very significant competitors: ConAgra with Kid Cuisine and Tyson Foods with Looney Tunes, both frozen lines, in contrast to My Own Meals' shelf-stable version.

On the surface, it would appear My Own Meals—and its aggressive president, Mary Anne Jackson—is in what George Bush might call “deep doo-doo” trying to swipe shares against the likes of ConAgra and Tyson. And I do think Jackson is feeling the heat; she recently hired an industry pro to head up marketing efforts.

But I don't see My Own Meals getting thrashed out of existence by its bigger foes. Not yet anyway. After all, it is still the only kids meal being offered in the shelf-stable microwaveable foods aisle.

It's worth noting that Jackson has shifted gears in pushing My Own Meals. Now she identifies her offerings as the “most nutritious” of the kids meals available. That is a new tactic apparently designed to thwart advances by ConAgra and Tyson.

Rather than emphasize the nutritional value of their products—although I'm sure both can make the case—ConAgra and Tyson attack with unique and colorful packaging, plus games and cartoon characters that appeal to kids. My Own Meals takes a more traditional approach. It goes no further in inducing kids than

to provide childlike writing scribbled crayon-style on the package.

My Own Meals isn't in trouble, but it may have to adapt and learn what ConAgra, Tyson and the country's fast-food competitors apparently know: Kids like gimmickry. They like gimmickry much better than they like nutrition. Kid Cuisine and Looney Tunes offer the gimmickry. My Own Meals does not.

My Own Meals, with its nutritional pitch, is selling to parents first, kids second. ConAgra and Tyson are selling strictly to kids. Probably on the premise—a correct one, I think—that kids often influence parents' buying decisions.

If that is the case, then My Own Meals ought to consider the value of adding to its perceived nutritional advantage with . . . fun and games. Because, inevitably, someone is going to come into the shelf-stable category and do just that.

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