

Rollout!

Kids knock Tyson out cold

But Swanson Fun Feast finds hot market.

BY JOE MULLICH

Just 26 months ago, Joni Wilson was raving about the first year's results for Looney Tunes, Tyson Foods' cartoon-laden entry into the kids' frozen meals market. "We've been performing ahead of projections, and in some markets we've reached parity with ConAgra's Kid Cuisine, the category's first entry," Joni Wilson told *Food Business* in those halcyon days.

Now Tyson isn't returning phone calls asking about Looney Tunes, but then the company doesn't have much to talk about: Tyson has yanked Looney Tunes from the market. The product's sales tumbled 55 percent to \$12.8 million for the year ending May 9, according to Nielsen Marketing Research.

And what about that "first entry"—ConAgra? Kid Cuisine's sales have slumped 38 percent to \$49.3 million during the same period, according to Nielsen. "All of the frozen meals have been down in the past year," says Pat Quarles, manager/public relations for ConAgra. "There has been a considerable price war in the past couple of years in frozen meals and some of that has washed over to the kids' market. We're in [the kids' frozen meals] business to stay and we'll do whatever is necessary to make this a viable business."

Compared with its down-and-out competitors, Swanson Foods is up-and-coming. Introduced a year ago by Campbell Soup Co., Swanson

Fun Feast has rung up \$39.7 million in sales during the past 52 weeks. "We were surprised by the rapid departure of Tyson," says Dale Thompson, senior marketing manager of Swanson Dinners. "We were pushing for market share, but we didn't expect to knock anyone out."

Nonetheless, Swanson, ConAgra and others are eagerly eyeing the shelf space that once belonged to Looney Tunes. "Anytime someone leaves in a competitive environment, there's more market share for you," says Thompson.

Swanson Fun Feast debuted in early 1992 with eight dinners and added three new meals last fall. The Feasts feature lift-out cold desserts—including ice cream, brownies and fruit cocktail—that can be consumed with dinner or saved for later. "We came in with a point of difference, made our mark in a hurry and have risen to share leadership," says Thompson.

For its part, ConAgra expects to emphasize in-store promotions and nutritional benefits. In 1992, ConAgra ran an educational program, called Nutrition U, in supermarkets; this year, the program will focus on kindergartners through third graders in schools. "Last year, we reformatted our products to make them



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more nutritionally balanced," says Quarles.

What happened to Looney Tunes? Many speculate that the licensing fee Tyson paid for putting Bugs Bunny and the Road Runner on the Looney Tunes boxes was a factor. Swanson, in contrast, decided to eschew familiar figures and developed eight of its own animal characters, including Barnie the Bear on Growlin' Grilled Cheese and Sammy the Shark on Chillin' Cheese Pizza.

There might be other reasons for Tyson's downfall as well. The large companies offering frozen meals for kids "have a lemming syndrome," says Mary Anne Jackson, president of My Own Meals, a Chicago com-

pany that produces shelf-stable meals. The dishes, Jackson says, tend to be similar—hamburger, macaroni and cheese, pizza and hot dogs. "There is not a marketplace for four major food companies selling the same thing," Jackson notes.

But then, innovation is no guarantee of success, either. Jackson pioneered shelf-stable meals for kids, but recently she fled the niche and switched her entire food line to kosher. The products will be marketed jointly under the My Own Meals insignia and the well-known Streit's kosher foods name.

"The kids' meal market was too big for us," says Jackson. "I refuse to lower my quality standards, and I can't compete in a big arena and educate consumers about shelf-stable."

But Richard Lawrence, president of Marketing Intelligence Service, Naples, N.Y., notes the food companies are looking to come out with even more foods aimed at kids. And despite the general decline in the kids' frozen meals market, the big players say their commitment remains firm. "We're in this for the long haul," says Thompson. "We're offering convenience foods for kids, and I don't see the time pressures on families letting up." 17