

POSITIONING

Kid's Kitchen May Face Safety Backlash

By Christine Donahue

Geo. A. Hormel & Co. has come a long way from its roots as a commodities processor towards becoming an aggressive marketer of branded packaged goods. Hormel's Top Shelf line of single-serve, shelf-stable microwaveable entrées is now ahead of other brands in that category, including General Foods' Impromptu, only two months after going into national distribution.

Hormel's latest launch, Kid's Kitchen, is ba-



A novel spin, but risky.

sically the same product as Top Shelf, except that it's targeted to kids. The Austin, Minn. company has put a novel spin on Kid's Kitchen by pitching it to parents as a product that teaches kids confidence and self-reliance by encouraging them to cook for themselves. The hitch in the strategy, however, may be concern about the safety of children using microwave ovens.

Microwave ovens are generally thought to be safer for kids to use than conventional stoves or ovens since microwave ovens themselves don't get hot. For the large and growing market of "latchkey" children—the some 7-million school-age kids who are home alone a good part of each weekday while parents are at work—microwaving snacks and dinner is already an engrained habit.

A few food marketers have targeted the latchkey market, including Thomas J. Lipton Inc., which has launched *KidSmarts*, a maga-

zine for latchkey kids. *KidSmarts* carries coupons for products such as Cup-A-Soup and Lipton Side Dishes, which are popular with kids and are microwaveable. "But we never suggest that children prepare hot food by themselves," says a Lipton spokeswoman. She adds that no formal guidelines exist as to how old children should be before they are allowed to use microwaves.

Hormel's packaging for Kid's Kitchen carries instructions illustrated with pictures of a child preparing the entrée. The packaging's brightly colored graphics closely resemble that of My Own Meals, a similar product launched last year by a Deerfield, Ill. start-up company of the same name.

But every package of My Own Meals carries the warning, "These meals are to be prepared by an adult, not by children." The warning was prompted by the possibility that a child could be burned by hot food or by steam coming off the food, says Mary Anne Jackson, the founder and president of My Own Meals.

Kid's Kitchen comes in a plastic dish with handles designed to stay cool to prevent burns, and a vented lid to prevent steaming, says Bill Bernardo, product marketing manager for the brand. Print and TV ads for Kid's Kitchen depict an adult present while a child prepares the product, but neither the package nor the ads state that an adult should supervise the preparation of the meal.

Children under 7 are not capable of safely microwaving food, according to Shriners' Burns Institute.

Bernardo says Kid's Kitchen isn't pitched to any specific age group. But an inside-the-package offer for a Kid's Kitchen Club, which offers membership cards and mailings, says, "If you're age 4 to 13, this is YOUR special Club," suggesting that children as young as 4 might be using the product.

Children under 7 are not capable of safely microwaving food, according to Matt Maley, director of risk management at the Shriners' Burns Institute in Cincinnati.

"If you give a child a product and say, 'this is your product,' the child tends to feel it's his to use and next time he gets hold of it he may not be supervised, which is very risky," says Maley. Maley routinely gets calls from lawyers fishing for liability cases against companies whose products have resulted in children getting burned. "Believe me," says Maley, "on something like this, the lawyers are just waiting." ■

Positioning

Is Hormel's Kid's Kitchen Safe for Children?

Manufacturers introducing microwaveable foods for children have been careful to point out that adults should actually prepare the food. Hormel's packaging for Kid's Kitchen, however, pictures a child preparing the entrée, raising concerns about the brand's safety.

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