



Microwave Foods and Packaging

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The Institute for Microwave Foods and Packaging*



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Future Issues

In June, Bob Schiffmann, President of R.F. Schiffmann Associates, will review and forecast consumer microwave developments of the 1990s and his personal outlook on the microwave foods market of the next decade.

Innovation will get special attention in future issues in features reviewing patents and novel product introductions.

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Mary Anne Jackson, President, MY OWN MEALS Inc., tells about her unique company

Like millions of other women, I am a busy mother! I have two young children, a husband and a career. I have little time for traditional cooking, though I like to cook when there's time to do a good job of it. You all know the story line well - How do we provide our children nutritious and tasty meals when we have so little time to spend in the kitchen?

.....The answer, it turned out, was to start a company devoted to solving that very problem, using the most advanced cooking instrument known, the microwave oven. What resulted was a novel solution - meals that could be prepared quickly, but with the assurance they would contain the necessary nutritive values that children needed for general good health.

Concept surveys, sent to consumers through a diaper service, produced a bigger response than we had anticipated, which in itself was encouraging. The idea of a high quality meal developed specifically for children, held strong appeal among mothers. To our surprise, many mothers attached pages of notes about what they wanted in meals for their children and what their children especially liked. We left out vegetables in our original concept but found that mothers absolutely wanted vegetables for best nutrition. Many said that if we were going to go forward with a nutritious meal we should make it a MEAL and put everything in it needed for true convenience. We found, no real surprise, that nutrition and quality were absolute musts for success. Variety and convenience came next, followed by microwavability. However, when offered two similar products - one microwavable, one not - consumers always chose the microwavable version.

In terms of packaging, consumers want meals that are convenient, portable, easy to open and economical; they do not want to pay a lot for packaging. So we decided to put MY OWN MEAL® products in shelf stable, boilable and microwavable plastic pouches. We wanted the meals to be in "flexible plastic cans", something consumers understand and find comfortable.

WHY SHELF STABLE instead of REFRIGERATED OR FROZEN?

We eliminated refrigerated and frozen options before we started our development project. We could possibly have provided a refrigerated product on a very small scale local basis, but to expand would have been virtually impossible for a small food company. The costs would have been pro-

hibitive, particularly with such a limited shelf life. Frozen offerings would have put us at a competitive disadvantage, and so we chose shelf stable as the most promising form for packaging and distribution.

WHY POUCHES AND NOT TRAYS?

Like the tray, MY OWN MEAL pouches are microwavable, but they are also boilable. Granted, most kitchens now contain a microwave oven, but almost as many do not, so an option to heat pouches in boiling water is an additional - and we think necessary - selling point. Pouches are also easier to open than trays. Since they are flexible and fit easily into purses, briefcases and pockets, they can be transported with ease. Moreover, we found in informal surveys that people who buy foods in plastic or aluminum trays feel obligated to wash and save them. This defeats the objective of using a tray and of not having to dirty a dish.

WHAT ABOUT THE KIDS AND THEIR PREFERENCES?

Everything we did was based on information collected from mothers and children. For example, we hired a food development firm of food technologists to work with us. We took 24 concepts and whittled them down to the five we took to market. To make certain both children and their mothers liked our meals, we tested and revised each formulation repeatedly based upon results; mothers in one room discussed what they wanted in the meals and children were in another doing the taste and appearance testing (as only a child can do!)

WHO DEVELOPED MY OWN MEALS PRODUCTS?

Mothers and their children. We just brought them to market."

My Own Meals line of products

Chicken, Please™
My Kind of Chicken™
My Meatballs and Shells™
My Turkey Meatballs™
My Favorite Pasta™

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