

By STERLING ANTHONY

Make room for baby boomers and seniors. One of the hottest and most competitive food segments these days is children. Consequently, marketers are trying a wide variety of packaging concepts to woo the younger set.

Although the segment is obviously age-driven, lifestyle variables also play a key role. For example, because of the growing number of single parents and two-job households, today's family has less time to prepare meals. As a result, time-harried parents are receptive to products that are convenient to prepare, yet nutritious and economical.

One product that fits those criteria is pasta. In fact, pasta is consistently among the top three in retail sales among all products sold in metal cans. And a quick look around indicates the pasta-for-kids category is getting larger and more competitive. Can manufacturing giant Libby's has entered the cate-

that guards against product spills.

And where would the aseptic packaging industry be without children? The vast majority of the retail volume in aseptics have been in products with kid appeal: fruit drinks, apple sauce, and puddings. Their suitability as lunch box items and snacks account for their popularity.

That kind of strategy is what McCain Citrus, located in Chicago, is banking on with its new product, Junior Juice. Using aseptic cartons, the company is pitching the packaged juice to children between the ages of 1 to 6. Since they are going for a much younger market, the company opted for a 4-oz. single serving instead of the traditional 8-oz. size. To grab the pre-school tots, packaging graphics feature illustrations done in the classical Beatrix Potter/Peter Rabbit style.

Del Monte was also considering aseptic packaging for its new Yogurt Cup line, but felt pasteurization, as opposed to the culture method, yielded flavor more to the liking of young palates. Instead, the company is rolling it out in four 3/4-oz. metal cans with pulling tops. The positioning strategy is to appeal to children as well as teenagers, so the labeling is not as "storybook-oriented" as that of some juvenile products. The same positioning strategy also pervades the names of the flavors: Awesome Peach, Rad Raspberry, Totaly Strawberry, Cool Blueberry.

gory with canned Dino Getti and Dino Ioli, both dinosaur-shaped pasta/tomato sauce combinations. To appeal to youngsters, the labels feature a series of realistically drawn dinosaurs.

American Home Foods and Campbell Soup also marketing fun-shaped pasta in metal cans. American Home Foods' Chef Boyardee lineup includes Dinosaurs, Tic-Tac-Toe, and ABC's & 123's. Campbell Soup has Teddy O's and Sporty O's under its Franco-American flag. Chef Boyardee has rolled out its pasta line in shelf-stable, microwavable plastic tubs.

More food manufacturers are now making microwavable packaging the choice for a number of children's products. That should come as no surprise considering the increasing frequency in which children are home alone and must prepare their own snacks and meals. Even fairly young "latch-key" children can be taught to use a microwave oven.

Recent converts to microwavable products for kids include:

- ConAgra, which recently launched Kid Cuisine, a line of microwavable, TV-dinner style frozen meals. Similar to Campbell's Souper Combo, the packaging consists of a sealed plastic tray inside a carton.

- J.R. Simplot, which features french fries, hamburgers, sandwiches, pizza, and milkshakes to its MicroMagic line. Microwavable paperboard is the predominant packaging material used.

- In the shelf-stable realm, there's My Own Meals, marketed by the Deerfield, Ill, company of the same name. The products are packaged in retort pouches; the pouches are contained in cartons. Shelf life is at least a year. Although the pouch is microwavable, the more reliable way to prepare the contents is to place it in boiling water.

- Hormel's microwavable Kid's Kitchen meals are also shelf-stable. The sealed barrier plastic bowl inside a shrink-wrapped carton provides an 18-month shelf life. The bowl has handles so that hands need not touch a hot surface. An added feature is a cover dome

Ready-to-eat cereal marketers know that package graphics are fundamental to communicating with children. Ralston's latest introductions include Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Breakfast With Barbie, Nintendo, Ghostbusters, and Batman cereals. All of the cartons sport high-impact graphics.

Kellogg is promoting Frosted Flakes with a "collector's series" of cartons featuring holograms of Tony the Tiger. The hologram is on the front panel; a frame on the back panel. The child cuts out the the two and pastes them together. Nabisco has made its first entry into the category with Teddy Grahams. Each of the three flavors has its own background color and bear character. Nabisco's way of achieving the child's involvement is a cut-out mask of a bear on the back panel.

Another successful tactic is to turn the packaging into a toy. For example, Nestle markets its chocolate-flavor syrup in a brown plastic bottle in the shape of a bunny. It's been so successful that the company is rolling out a red bunny for its strawberry-flavor syrup.

Del Monte went the package-as-toy route for its Hawaiian Punch concentrate. Its a barrier plastic bottle in the shape of "Punchy," the character long featured on the label and in television commercials.

Another product that follows similar lines is General Foods' Burple, a powdered drink in a squat, accordion-like polyethylene bottle, that hit the market a few years ago. Pulling the bottle elongates it, after wick water is added, and the drink is poured from the

bottle. The concept was so successful that General Foods' introduced Kool-Aid in it last year.

Betty Crocker's Squeezit is the latest juice product in a polyethylene bottle to hit the market. Actually, it's a form of aseptic packaging: the bottles are blown, filled, and capped while in the mold. Since the cap is a continuation of the bottle, the child must twist it off to drink it. The product is sold, shelf-stable, in six-packs of 6.75-oz. bottles. Betty Crocker is promoting the product as an ideal food item for the lunch box, picnics and car trips.

How young a consumer will the food and beverage industry target? Consider this: Growing Gourmet, located in Walnut Creek, CA, is marketing a line of casseroles for children as young as nine months old. Other baby food companies are following suit. Last year, Gerber launched single-serving cereal, with the packaging at the core of the concept. The carton holds six disposable feeding cups. A single serving of the cereal is prepared in a cup, from which the baby is fed.

Regardless of the targeted age group, the children's food category has room for continued growth. For example, "light" foods are absent from the category even though many studies have shown that a concernable percentage of children are overweight. And when, and from whom, might we see children's products in the fresh refrigerated category?

As the children segment continues to expand, packaging will be integral as a means to differentiate and support the positioning of products. □