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MARKETER
OF THE
YEAR

JOAN CHOW

ConAgra
Foods®
Food you love



In 2008, Joan Chow wanted to understand why consumers felt such a bond with the Orville Redenbacher's brand, so she did something counterintuitive—she took it away from them.

The two-week deprivation study worked. When the moms were finally allowed to munch again, Chow discovered that popcorn consumption was a social endeavor as much as anything else. "The family gathers around it," Chow says. "It's the kind of snack that, when it's finished and warming in a bowl, you have to go to the one room where the popcorn is." This experiment inspired a successful series of ads (via Venables Bell & Partners, San Francisco) that showed a family having so much fun eating popcorn in their RV that dad leaves the driver's seat, nearly sending everyone over a cliff.

Metaphorically mapping the DNA for brands like Orville Redenbacher's and then figuring out how to grow them is the main focus for Chow, ConAgra's CMO, who, since joining the company in 2007, has taken a number of trusty-ified brands and put them back on a growth track. While other companies have driven their marketing departments to chase fads, Chow's aim has been to take what already works and make it work better.

"One of Joan's strengths is she doesn't get caught up in the glitz and dreaming of a marketing objective," says Rob Sharpe, ConAgra's evp of external affairs and commercial foods

CHOICE ENDORSEMENT

41%

Higher brand recall, since ConAgra launched the Julia Louis-Dreyfus Healthy Choice ads, per IAG.

unit president. "She starts with facts and then drives toward what she wants to change. She is able to really put herself in the role of the consumer and work toward communication that gets the right message across in an eye-catching way."

Chow's leadership comes at a crucial time for ConAgra. The company, with \$12.7 billion in net sales, is in the midst of a turnaround led by steady growth in its food brands, which in some cases were in need of a spit shine. Egg Beaters had been on the shelves since 1972 and Healthy Choice since 1988, with Pam cooking spray dating to the early 1960s.

On Chow's watch, the company has sold off its agricultural units and underperforming brands to focus on what the company considers are its key assets—household brands like Egg Beaters and Pam that still have growth potential. As a result, analysts say the company has a strong portfolio to profit from the recession-driven eat-at-home trend. For instance: Don't want to pay for the high-

end Healthy Choice brand? Then ConAgra will sell you its lower-priced Banquet line.

Otherwise, double-digit sales growth for brands like Marie Callender's, Banquet and Healthy Choice are driven by innovation. Chow's remake of Healthy Choice is a case study in her methods. In 2007, ConAgra introduced a proprietary technology that preserved the freshness of meals steamed in a microwave.

Meanwhile, Chow refreshed the outside with contemporary packaging, in particular replacing the "I" in "Healthy" with a green exclamation point to underscore the surprise of taste and nutrition coexisting in a frozen food meal. Moves like these are helping the brand gain shelf space and retail velocity in a category it once pioneered, albeit alongside competitors like Heinz's Smart Ones and Nestlé's Lean Cuisine. In contemporizing Healthy Choice, Chow says, the goal was not to "launch [more] line extension[s]," but to "fully reinvent the brand" by keeping with her mantra of "fewer, bigger, better."

So far, the approach is showing results, and analysts like David Driscoll of Citi Investment Research say that Chow's strategy is likely to help ConAgra even more later on. "We're just starting to see these impacts," he says, adding that ConAgra has definitely gotten more savvy and strategic in its marketing. "It's something they weren't known for a few years ago."

Not that Chow is ready to declare any marketing effort done. She describes her philosophy—one she's drummed into her team—as "measure, learn, change." As she puts it: "There's never a big winner or a big loser. You should always have lessons learned in everything you do and continue to strive." ■

By Elaine Wong



HOT STUFF

First introduced in 1988, the Healthy Choice franchise has offered Chow a near-endless horizon for line extensions. Cafe Steamers was the No. 1 new food launch of last year, according to IRI, and continues to push the culinary envelope with varieties including chicken margherita and grilled whiskey steak.