

ADWEEK

Can Kraft Macaroni & Cheese Market Itself As Healthful?

New ads play up the protein in classic comfort food

By Andrew McMains

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Can Kraft Macaroni & Cheese credibly market itself as healthful?

That's a core question behind new TV and digital ads from Crispin Porter + Bogusky that tout the brand's protein quotient ("nine grams of protein per serving"), albeit with the same playful tone of its longstanding "You Know You Love It" campaign.

It's not a heavy sell, as only some ads this year will play up protein. Indeed, of three TV spots rolling out this month, just one, "Pots Galore," which features a young couple and breaks next week, employs that strategy.

But, of course, competitors like Annie's play up their ingredients in a bid to appeal to health-conscious parents, so why shouldn't Kraft?

The new direction, which Kraft unveiled first to Adweek, stems from the misgivings of millennial parents, who don't think their children are eating enough protein, said Sara Braun, a senior marketing director on Kraft Macaroni & Cheese. "It's about making sure that these parents have the nutritional reassurance they need to feel better about serving Kraft Mac and Cheese," explained Braun. Or, as CP+B executive creative director Adam Chasnow put it, "We look at it as, this is really good news."

Still, one strategic planner questions why Kraft is employing a healthful message at all, given its well-established—and cherished—identity as comfort food.

"The comfort food angle of Kraft has always been very powerful for them. I don't think they can become what they're not," said Domenico Vitale, founder of People Ideas & Culture and a former head of strategy at Lowe and Kirshenbaum Bond + Partners. "I don't think anyone will ever buy it as a healthy food."

Braun acknowledged as much but defended the new micro-strategy as measured and in proportion to the brand's macro-positioning as fun food that parents love as much as kids. That big picture approach is loud and clear in the other new TV ads: "Airplane Detour," in which a mom steers a spoonful of mac and cheese away from her baby and into her mouth, and "Young at Heart," where comic actress Estelle Harris (George's mom on *Seinfeld*) commandeers the kids' table at a family dinner to get more of the dish.

"It's definitely [about] striking a balance because we have heard time and time again from our consumers that they don't think of macaroni and cheese as a health food," Braun said. "But in today's food environment, they just want to feel better about it." She added that the amount of protein per 2.4 ounce serving "is nothing new. But it's new news to our consumers."

Fair enough, said Katherine Wintsch, CEO of The Mom Complex. Wintsch liked the humor of "Pots Galore," in which a husband in a kitchen flashes his knowledge of protein to his wife, but she wished the ad went further to put the nine grams in context.

"If I'm not studying labels, I don't know if that's good or bad—or high or low," Wintsch said. "I think the spot is funny, but I think the claim could be more easily digestible and not as basic."

Braun declined to reveal media spending behind this year's ads, which also includes marketing around new Star Wars and Minions shapes. Typically, however, the brand spends \$35-40 million annually on media, according to Kantar Media.

