

Frozen Food Industry Plans Massive PR Campaign as Sales Slip

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NEW YORK (AP) — Frozen foods are about to get some badly needed image therapy.

With sales slipping in the category, frozen food makers are in the final stages of preparing a major public relations campaign to defend the nutritional reputation of their products. The push will include what are said to be the first national TV ads on behalf of the industry as a whole, as well as social media and in-store promotions.

Kraig Naasz, president of the American Frozen Food Institute, confirmed that the industry trade group plans to launch the "multiyear, multimillion dollar" campaign in early May.

He declined to provide details but said the thrust of the campaign would be to educate people that the freezing process is just a way to hit the "pause button" to lock in the nutrients, quality and taste of fresh food. It's the biggest marketing push on behalf of the industry to date and the first to include national TV ads, according to the American Frozen Food Institute.

The group, based in McLean, Va., represents companies including Nestle USA, which makes Hot Pockets, Lean Cuisine and Stouffer's, and ConAgra, which makes Healthy Choice and Marie Callender's.

The campaign comes as Americans are increasingly reaching for foods they feel are fresh. That has hurt the performance of many frozen foods, which are often seen as being processed and full of preservatives or sodium.

Between 2009 and last year, U.S. sales of frozen meals are down 3 percent at \$8.92 billion, according to Euromonitor International. The market researcher is forecasting a decline of another 2 percent this year.

In addition to the industry campaign, companies are working behind the scenes to communicate the benefits of frozen foods to dietitians. The hope is that such health professionals will then pass on the message to their clients.

Nestle USA, for instance, later this month plans to present research it commissioned at the Experimental Biology conference that compares the nutrition of frozen foods to fast-food meals.

The company also recently introduced a "Balance Your Plate on a Budget" meal plan featuring products such as Hot Pockets and Tombstone pizza for people on fixed incomes. The plan will be distributed to dietitians at conferences and online.

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When asked if the company encountered any criticism for featuring such products in meal plans designed to be healthy, Chavanne Hanson, a dietitian who works for Nestle, said that it was the "exact opposite."

"This is realistic, this is how people eat," she said.

ConAgra Foods Inc. also revamped its Healthy Choice meals to simplify the ingredients and is working on a PR campaign to communicate the changes. That push has included reaching out to dietitians employed by supermarkets.

"We spent months educating each of these dietitians," said Jenn Freeman, vice president and general manager for the brand.

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