

BRANDWEEK

VOL. XLK NO. 5 JANUARY 19, 2009 \$3.99

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FOOD

Food marketers want
to sell consumers fiber.
But talk about what it
does? Not so much.

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By Elaine Wong

Smashies' Special Sauce Is the Desire for Neatness

A serial entrepreneur finds inspiration in the messiness of apple sauce container and a packaging solution born out of the space program.

By Becky Ebenkamp bebenkamp@brandweek.com

PEOPLE WHO REPEAT THE PROVERB

"necessity is the mother of invention" have probably visited a preschool after snack-sized tubs of applesauce have had their contents repurposed as room accents and fashion flourishes.

"If you've ever seen kids attack those packages and open those foil lids, you know there's not a portion of their body that's not covered in applesauce," said Karsten Robbins, founder of Smashies Pouches.

Robbins can recognize a business opportunity waiting to happen. A lifelong foodie, serial entrepreneur and parent particular about what he puts in his kids' lunch boxes, Robbins saw a need for an organic snack that was easy to eat and tote in eco-friendly packaging and came up with the idea for Smashies.

The barely three-month-old brand is expected to sell 750,000 cases this year and grow into national accounts such as Target and Costco by the back-to-school season.

Before Smashies, Robbins dreamed up Luvli, a line of veggie juices. "It did well, but it's very niche," Robbins said.

He was schooled in the ropes of retail in the organic soup business. "I learned how to build and distribute a brand, and it gave us an appreciation of what it takes to bring a product to the market."

Luvli is undergoing a repositioning, so Robbins set out to find a snack food the company could bring to market quickly, one that could make a big impact. Ultimately, filling followed form.

"We found this great packaging that was developed for the space program that has been popular in Europe and Asia," Robbins said of Smashies' squeezable, BPA-free housing with a screw-off cap.

Applesauce was chosen as the content: It's perceived by parents as a "healthy" snack, but a lot of what's on the market contains sweeteners and Robbins doesn't believe in sugar coating for kids. "Our Snappy Apple actually tastes like an

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apple," he said, pitting his product against the typical treacherously, over-processed kiddie brand. "Food should taste like food."

Kids, it turns out, instinctively hit the sauce: Overwhelmingly, parents are writing Robbins to report they're sucking on Smashies as if they're baby bottles.

"Applesauce hasn't had a lot of innovation," Robbins said. "It went from big jars that sit in the back of the fridge to foil cups that you wouldn't dare hand to your kids in the back seat. We think that being organic and no sugar added is a necessity as a parent."

Natural food retailers have responded. Smashies sold 100,000 units in 2008—and they didn't even launch until mid-October, in a handful of Northeastern markets. The



Getting smashed: Each Smashies pouch is USDA organic and contains one serving of fruit.

brand is traipsing its way across the country and is currently selling in Whole Foods' New England region.

It will soon spread to the chain's North Atlantic stores, and Amazon and H-E-B also will carry the pouches this spring.



BRAND: Smashies

HEADQUARTERS: Boston

PRODUCT: USDA organic fruit sauces in squeezable, flexible pouches

LAUNCH DATE: Fall 2008

SALES: \$2.5 million projected for 2008

TARGET DEMO: Parents who want a portable, nutritionally sound snack for their kids

COMPETITION: GoGo Squeeze (Materne)

DISTRIBUTION: Whole Foods, H-E-B, Westley Health Foods, Mrs. Green's Natural Markets

CLAIMS: Organic, with no sugar or corn syrup added

SECRET WEAPON: Convenience

NEW PRODUCTS: Straw Nana and Mango Smash flavors

"The product's great—I love the convenience and the package," said Phil Lempert, editor of Supermarketguru.com, when he reviewed Smashies for his site.

The only drawback: The \$1.39 price tag. "It's slightly expensive because of the packaging and whether or not a mom wants to spend that much in today's economy for that convenience, that's the question," he said.

While advertising in parenting magazines is still a gleam in his eye, Robbins is harnessing the power of mom bloggers.

"Moms like to hear what other moms have to say," he said, and peer-to-peer networks are a great tool for brands without a lot of bucks, unless you're peddling a crappy product. "They'll be honest about it!"

Smashies is off to a smashing start, even if it isn't the best time to be a young brand.

"A lot of brands compete on price alone, and we think there's another value: Parents are willing to pay for convenience and to sneak extra fruits and veggies into their kids diets," Robbins said. "The market doesn't need another salsa. The market needs people who can bring real innovation."

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