

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

# Spam

Marketing an Identity

Food in American History - 21H.S01

Anya Zilberstein

From the front lines of World War II to the kitchen counters of American households, Spam has been integrated into American culture through a variety of applications. Spam's evolution in the American marketplace has been defined by the corporate initiatives taken to shape the product's identity. Following the initial booming sales in World War II, Spam struggled to distance itself from the utilitarian perception that many Americans had developed from the stories of the product on the front lines. As a result, Hormel, the company that developed Spam, invested heavily into marketing strategies that focused on household applications of Spam. Although these strategies proved successful in the 1950's and early 1960's, Spam's popularity dramatically decreased as Hormel reduced the product's marketing presence in mainland America.

The underlying perception of Spam throughout its popularity in America was that of a product made for the military. This shared belief by consumers led Hormel on an uphill battle of marketing Spam with a new identity, a battle that seemingly could not be won. Regardless of the marketing efforts by Hormel, there existed a stigma in the marketplace of which the grandiose corporate marketing techniques could only cover for so long. These forced identities that Hormel created began to dissolve with the shift of Hormel's focus toward more inviting markets.

In contrast to the strained efforts put forward by Hormel in mainland America to create a new identity for Spam, the product flourished independently of marketing campaigns in Asian and island nations. Following World War II, the unpredictable supply of Spam caused the product to be viewed as a novelty item in

these emerging markets. Once distribution was established to these consumers, they were quick to adopt Spam into their local everyday cuisine. This organic growth of Spam's popularity has allowed the product to remain a staple food in the diet of island nations.

In the 1930's, the meat industry threw out thousands of pounds of unused pork shoulder meat each year. The pork shoulder was considered to be of lesser value than that of other pork cuts, and the time it took to remove the shoulder meat from the bone was typically not worth the investment. Jay Hormel, the CEO of Hormel Foods Corporation at the time, saw this unused meat surplus as a promising opportunity. Throughout the 1930's, Hormel had become increasingly more interested in canned products and their extended shelf life. After seeing the previous success of industrial-sized canned ham from the late 1920's, Hormel set out to create a small, family-friendly food product that utilized the shoulder meat. With this vision in mind, the Hormel Foods Corporation introduced Spam in 1937.<sup>1</sup>

Spam's introduction into the marketplace coincided with the beginning of World War II. Jay Hormel, an isolationist, personally opposed the United States' involvement in the war. It was not until seeing the nation's support following the Pearl Harbor attacks that Hormel realized the marketing power that the war could provide for the newly invented canned product. Spam was deemed the perfect food for feeding troops. It was considered cheap, nourishing, filling, and very shelf-

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<sup>1</sup> Wyman, Carolyn. Spam: A Biography. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1999. Print. pp. 4-5

stable.<sup>2</sup> Spam being included in the war meant that Hormel Food Company could reach thousands of new users within the military, expand its distribution to many different areas of the world, and piggyback on the marketing of heightened national pride back home.

As Hormel expected, the sales of Spam skyrocketed dramatically during the war. Between 1939 and 1942, net sales doubled to almost \$120 million. By 1944, it was estimated that 90% of all of Hormel's canned goods were being distributed to military troops or to military aid programs.<sup>3</sup> It became evident that with these large military contracts, marketing was not the most essential aspect of Hormel's business plan. The United States military was clearly not purchasing Spam as a response to its marketing campaign, but instead because of its practical qualities. Additionally, Hormel was not given much freedom throughout the war for marketing on the front lines, as the military controlled the packaging for logistical purposes.

Due to the lack of Hormel's active marketing, Spam's early identity was predominantly a result of the soldiers' opinions. Spam became one of the most overstocked foods in the military supply chain and as a result, many soldiers became exhausted of this food. The repetitiveness of Spam in the military diet led to an overall negative perception by soldiers across the front lines. Spam was often referred to as "the ham that didn't pass its physical" and "meatloaf without

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<sup>2</sup> Wyman, Carolyn. Spam: A Biography. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1999. Print. pp. 16

<sup>3</sup> Wyman, Carolyn. Spam: A Biography. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1999. Print. pp. 17

basic training”. Although the name of the product was not intended to be a known acronym to the public, the soldiers began describing the food as “SPecial Army Meat”.<sup>4</sup>

By providing Spam on the front lines, Hormel could use this consumption as a case for how the product would perform with little or no marketing.

Unfortunately for Hormel, the many negative stories that originated from the front lines did not give Hormel confidence in their product going forward in the post-war era. One example of a soldier’s negative opinion of Spam was that of Walter McClatchey. McClatchey and his unit were freezing and starving one winter day, waiting for the Air Force plane to deliver a drop-off of food to their line. As the plane came overhead, his unit cheered for the anticipation of food. However, when the boxes came closer to the ground everyone could read the big logo on the side: “Spam”. McClatchey recalls, “We shot the hell out of it”. He went on to say that even the German prisoners refused to eat it. These types of stories often circulated throughout the troops, which solidified a negative perception toward the product amongst their primary consumers.<sup>5</sup>

It soon became clear that Spam had acquired a solely utilitarian perception. Hormel understood its place in the market and was not too concerned with the negative associations at first because their sales were booming. However, at the first glimpse of Allied victory, it became apparent to Hormel that their business

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<sup>4</sup> Wyman, Carolyn. Spam: A Biography. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1999. Print. pp. 20

<sup>5</sup> Wyman, Carolyn. Spam: A Biography. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1999. Print. pp. 21

model was not fundamentally sound or sustainable. Hormel only had one significant distributor, the United States military, with no solid grasp at all on the domestic market. In the later years of the war, Hormel decided to turn their focus back to the United States mainland.<sup>6</sup> With this new focus, Hormel needed to begin its use of heavy marketing to create a new, positive identity with the U.S. consumer.

Once the war began to die down and the U.S. involvement dramatically decreased, the amount of Spam orders from the military posts in the island nations declined significantly because the military need had subsided. Looking for a new market to capture, Hormel set their eyes on the housewives of mainland America. With the heightened national pride following the strong success of the American military in World War II, Hormel knew they could capitalize on their strong military involvement. From a strategic point of view, Hormel increased their Spam advertising campaigns in order to get families introduced to Spam before the war was over and to ensure a seamless transition for when the soldiers came back<sup>7</sup>.

With the conclusion of the war, as expected, Hormel's bottom line began to shrink. Hormel needed to respond to the changing consumer quickly in order to remain relevant in the marketplace. Hormel had pinpointed several potential markets, but it became necessary for them to understand the trends of these

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<sup>6</sup> Wyman, Carolyn. Spam: A Biography. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1999. Print. pp. 34

<sup>7</sup> Wansink, Brian. Changing Eating Habits on the Home Front: Lost Lessons from World War II Research. American Marketing Association. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, Vol. 21, No. 1, Social Marketing Initiatives (Spring, 2002), pp. 90-92

prospective users. As canned and preserved foods became more popular in the kitchens of American housewives, there was a push by most food companies to appeal to the easy-preparation trend.<sup>8,9</sup> Hormel believed that Spam had the potential to fit well into this category. The next step in Hormel's marketing strategy was to educate the consumer. Given that Spam was a relatively new product in the kitchen, a significant percentage of the intended users were completely unaware of how to incorporate this product into their meals. Hormel had thus identified a new niche for Spam in the marketplace, and therefore understood that they needed to invest more in marketing. Instead of allowing consumers the chance to experiment with Spam in their kitchen and find their opinions independently, Hormel could craft their identity in the marketplace through strategic marketing<sup>10</sup>.

In the 1950's and into the early 1960's, Hormel reached out to multiple advertising companies to help push their product into the consumer market through various marketing strategies. One particular individual who helped Hormel with this challenge was Jean Wade Rindlaub. Rindlaub was one of the first women to become a powerful advertising executive in the United States. She

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<sup>8</sup> Neuhaus, Jessamyn. The Way to a Man's Heart: Gender Roles, Domestic Ideology, and Cookbooks in the 1950s. *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Spring, 1999), pp. 529-555

<sup>9</sup> Patten, Marguerite. *Spam: The Cookbook*. London: Octopus Pub. Group, 2001. Print.

<sup>10</sup> Wansink, Brian. Changing Eating Habits on the Home Front: Lost Lessons from World War II Research. American Marketing Association. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, Vol. 21, No. 1, Social Marketing Initiatives (Spring, 2002), pp. 92-99

identified that in order to achieve the desired new image for Spam, Hormel needed to distance itself from the utilitarian image that many soldiers brought back home from war. Rindlaub had two main focuses on the Hormel account. One focus was to predict the evolution of Spam in the marketplace, which involved identifying potential markets, both domestic and international. Her second focus was to find ways in which Spam could appeal to the classic American housewife.

Focusing specifically on her second objective, Rindlaub helped develop extensive strategies for integrating Spam into the American household. One of her main strategies was through the use of cookbooks. By outlining to housewives the various ways that they could use the product, Hormel was able to better control the perception of Spam. The cookbooks included all varieties of dishes with the ultimate goal of incorporating Spam into as many different aspects of daily life as possible. Section headings in the cookbook include titles such as “Children’s Lunches”, “Spread Crackers with Spam Spread”, and “French Toast Spam-wiches”. This large marketing expenditure exemplified Hormel’s desire to move Spam away from a one-meal product and towards a more versatile meat that could be used in all meals<sup>11</sup>.

Throughout the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, this marketing campaign kept Spam as a staple item in grocery stores. A letter by Rindlaub in 1963 to Pat Dolan, a Hormel executive, details her beliefs on Spam’s battle with competition and Spam’s recovery from decreasing sales. Rindlaub states, “There were as many as

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<sup>11</sup> Rindlaub, Jean Wade, 1904-1991. Papers of Jean Wade Rindlaub, 1899-1991 (inclusive), 10.6, *New Food Ideas*, 1961-1963.

180 imitators. But through all the years we have had the account, it has kept its No. 1 share of market. Service advertising had a lot to do with this – ways to bake and broil and fry ham, Spam-whiches, Spam and eggs – a world of new and easy ideas.”<sup>12</sup> From this quote, it is clear that Hormel’s corporate initiatives helped preserve the image of Spam even during the times when the quality of food was highly debated by the men who had returned from war.

Another corporate initiative used to maintain the sales of Spam from the late 1940’s through the 1950’s was The Hormel Girls, a performing group. On any given Sunday evening, the program *Music with the Hormel Girls* would be broadcasted across the nation on the radio, the primary source of entertainment for middle class America at this time. This program was a band of female World War II veterans who were organized to market Hormel’s food products.<sup>13</sup> The group would also tour the nation, performing in a variety of settings including village band shells, theaters, and universities. They used an assortment of sales strategies as well as musical performances to sell Hormel’s products. These strategies included in-person cooking demos and personal stories from the front lines.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Rindlaub, Jean Wade, 1904-1991. Papers of Jean Wade Rindlaub, 1899-1991 (inclusive), 10.7, *New Food Ideas*, 1961-1963.

<sup>13</sup> Wyman, Carolyn. Spam: A Biography. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1999. Print. pp. 18

<sup>14</sup> Sullivan, Jill. The Hormel Girls. University of Illinois Press. *American Music*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Fall, 2007), pp. 282-311

Hormel made a significant decision to continue the simplicity of Spam following the war, mainly because Jay Hormel liked his products to be simple and to have unpretentious names.<sup>15</sup> Because of this blandness, the product was often considered ordinary. Through the productions of The Hormel Girls and the use of evening radio programming, a more grandiose appearance was formed around the brand. This image was used to disguise the utilitarian perception that originally came out of the war. The use of veterans as performers was also used to appeal to all of the former troops who may have had poor experiences with the product during their service.

By the 1960's the canned food market became very saturated with competitors. Marketing campaigns such as The Hormel Girls became too expensive as the return on investment began to dwindle. Many attribute this decrease of the program's popularity to the replacement of radio by a new invention, television. Because of these changes, Spam struggled to maintain its hold on American housewives. Around this time, Hormel decided to focus its efforts on more promising emerging markets, namely Hawaii and Asia. Because of this reduction in marketing, Spam then began to adopt a novelty item image in the U.S. marketplace. From the 1970's and on, after the initial decline, Spam was able to maintain a steady market share in the canned meat sector. Today, Spam is regularly integrated into the meals of approximately 30% of American households. Although the product maintains strong sales, it is often associated with impoverished regions because of its low cost.

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<sup>15</sup> Wyman, Carolyn. Spam: A Biography. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1999. Print. pp. 5

In contrast to Spam's history in the continental United States, this product had an entirely different trajectory in different geographical areas of the world. From the research that was conducted by advertisement agencies and individuals like Jean Rindlaub, Hormel began to notice an increase in demand from markets such as Hawaii, the Philippines, and other island nations beginning in the late 1950's <sup>16</sup>. In a contradicting strategy from what Hormel implemented in the mainland U.S., the company put very little marketing resources into these island markets towards the end of World War II. In the late 1940's, local island stores and neighborhoods were supplied with Spam as military relief or when there was excess stock in the military supply chain. Because of this unpredictable supply availability, Spam was instead viewed as a novelty product.<sup>17</sup>

As the mainland American household became a less attractive market for Hormel, they turned their focus toward these island markets that had incorporated Spam organically into their diet with minimal marketing efforts by the corporation. As an example, Spam musubi, a sushi-like rice and Spam roll, became a popular snack and lunch food item in Hawaii without the efforts of big-name advertisers like Rindlaub developing recipes.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Rindlaub, Jean Wade, 1904-1991. Papers of Jean Wade Rindlaub, 1899-1991 (inclusive), 10.6-10.7, *New Food Ideas*, 1961-1963.

<sup>17</sup> Miyares, Ines. Expressing "Local Culture" in Hawai'i. *American Geographical Society. Geographical Review*, Vol. 98, No. 4 (Oct., 2008), pp. 525-531.

<sup>18</sup> Miyares, Ines. Expressing "Local Culture" in Hawai'i. *American Geographical Society. Geographical Review*, Vol. 98, No. 4 (Oct., 2008), pp. 513-520.

Once the significant size of the potential island and Asian market was realized, Hormel began to invest in marketing and distribution to meet the demands instead of entirely focusing on the domestic market. The effects of corporate marketing became apparent in the late 1950's. As more product testing and marketing was completed by Hormel, more varieties of Spam became available in the island and Asian markets. Each variety appealed to the local cuisine. For example, in China the Spam formula contains more meat and less salt in order to accommodate the cultural tastes.<sup>19</sup>

This movement from virtually no marketing in the early 1950's to a large allocation in the 1960's is a direct contrast to that of mainland America. As Spam had progressed from a staple item to a novelty item throughout the mainland U.S., Spam's presence in Asian and island markets did the completely opposite and had developed from a novelty product to an staple grocery item. In these regions, canned foods do not carry the same "poor food" stigma as in mainland United States. Canning food is necessary for aspects of transportation such as shelf life when delivering products to island nations via shipping routes. Since grocery stores often contained mainly canned and preserved food, the fact that Spam was a canned food did not lead to the impression that Spam was a "poor person's food"; instead, it fit well with the existing grocery store products. Additionally, many companies produced imitations of Spam in these marketplaces, so this lower quality competition helped remove any perceived cheapness of Spam in the eyes of the consumer.

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<sup>19</sup> Wyman, Carolyn. Spam: A Biography. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1999. Print. pp. 12

Hormel continues to invest in marketing campaigns in the Asian and island markets today. Through various partnerships, Spam is utilized in popular fast food companies such as Burger King in Korea and Japan. In the Philippines, Spam is seen as a cultural symbol. There are nine different varieties of Spam available in the Philippines, and the country purchases an estimated 1.25 million kilos of the meat every year.<sup>20</sup>

The success of Spam in both the mainland U.S. and island nation marketplaces can be traced back to their introductions into the respective markets. Hormel Corporation had to incorporate a significant amount of marketing in the mainland United States as they fought to alter the stigma from Spam's military applications. This identity that Hormel forced upon American consumers broke down in the 1960's as the advertisement campaigns could not sustain the image of the product and differentiate the product from competitors. On the contrary, Spam in the Pacific took on a much more organic evolution. With the early years of consumption free from corporate marketing strategies, the Pacific societies were able to incorporate Spam into their diets in a more natural progression. Without the cookbooks and lavish travelling groups informing consumers how to use Spam, the Pacific created recipes much more meaningful to their culture that have remained a part of their society to this day.

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<sup>20</sup> Wyman, Carolyn. Spam: A Biography. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1999. Print. pp. 14

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