

The Cult of Convenience: Marketing and Food in Postwar America

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Amidst other major changes to the food system, America witnessed an extensive transformation of marketing within the postwar era. Specifically, the concept of convenience quickly became a favorite of corporations across the food chain. However, despite the favorable market conditions and an outwardly receptive customer base, companies quickly found that they needed to negotiate with public perceptions of food, cultural ideals, and social realities. Using primarily corporate sources, this paper explores the development and use of convenience by food marketers. It investigates how processors sought to exploit postwar tensions between labor and gender. The project also examines how companies grappled with customer expectations of product quality. Ultimately, companies that successfully leveraged their ability to offer quick, quality meals further embedded themselves into consumer choices and lifestyles. By cultivating and marketing a specific message, corporations used convenience to make themselves appear indispensable to living and eating well in the postwar era.

Keywords: Food; gender; marketing; US 20th

Opening in 1957, the House of the Future became Southern California's latest Disneyland attraction. Sponsored by Monsanto, this house gave visitors a glimpse into what Americans could enjoy by the mid-1980s.

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Over the next three years, more than six million people walked through the doors of this structure to ogle at the possibilities of the future. One of the most popular rooms proved to be the kitchen. Stocked with advanced appliances, including a high-powered microwave for quick cooking, refrigerated pantry to freeze and store foodstuffs, and a sonic dishwasher for easy cleanup, the kitchen looked to be a homemaker's dream. Quick, easy, and most of all *convenient*, Monsanto's house offered a happy outlook where the homemaker could enjoy all the benefits of future without the backbreaking drudgery of the past. In fact, in using the materials provided by the corporation, the whole family could find food production and consumption completely changed for "the better." Or as the chemical giant argued, "The fun is making the most of the ultimate in kitchen convenience and efficiency. A dream of the future brought to reality by Monsanto."¹ Monsanto claimed to hold the key to the chains binding America's wives and mothers. Its ability to provide time-saving technology would deliver on its promise that "tomorrow is always built on today."²

As many scholars have shown, this belief was reflected not just in Monsanto's corporate attractions, but also within the wider transformation and greater corporatization of the American food retail industry after World War II. Aided by a number of different factors (including federal policy, technological advancements, and favorable economic conditions), America's food chain reached a new level of commercialization not seen anywhere else in the world at this time. This directly influenced the enormous growth of American corporations, both domestically and abroad. As a subject for scholarly inquiry, this topic offers multiple points of entry. Some argued that the postwar economic boom and changing consumer attitudes retained assumptions about consumerism and citizenship.³ Others focused on the growth of the supermarket and the fast-food restaurant as a wider symbol of these changes. These shopping centers owed much to the vision of collective order and predictability desired by the state and retailers alike.⁴ Still other scholars emphasized the contributions of certain industries to develop consumer trust and helped pave the way for the eventual triumph of corporate agribusiness.⁵ In many of these works, the concept

1. "The Future Won't Wait," *Monsanto Magazine*, 40, no. 1 (August 1960), series 8, box 12, Monsanto Company Records, University Archives, Washington University in St. Louis, St. Louis, Missouri (hereafter, Monsanto Collection).

2. *Ibid.*

3. Cohen, *Consumers' Republic*, 5–15, 257–289.

4. Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise*, 13–43, 183–219; Hamilton, *Supermarket USA*; Steve Penfold, "Fast Food," *The Oxford Handbook of Food History*, 279–304.

5. Zeide, *Canned*.

of convenience played an integral if largely unaddressed role. It allowed companies to appeal directly to postwar conventions of identity and consumption. Convenience shaped physical and metaphysical changes to everyday buying and selling. It placed new demands on the marketplace and new expectations on the institutions and people that supplied it to consumers.

While convenience has certainly been a critical pillar of support of many historical works, there is little exploration of this concept in its own right. As a term and an idea, scholars have used “convenience” quite heavily (especially in examining the postwar era). Both ubiquitous and opaque, it functioned as a mutually understood concept, one that could be equally applied to election politics and international shipping.⁶ Yet mutually understood does not mean analyzed as a larger concept. Only a few historians have attempted to tackle different aspects of convenience and its changing influence on food and consumption. Roger Horowitz detailed its effect on meat products but focused mainly on animal production, processing, and packaging. Ai Hisano also focused on convenience and packaging, exploring how cellophane changed self-service and product design. Sometimes scholars have examined convenience in terms of its (often contradictory) relationship to the conception of freshness. Others, such as Anna Ziede, whose work implicitly discussed convenience as a foundational aspect of the canning industry, have looked at specific industries.⁷ For all the traffic this concept has received as a major part of modern consumption, there is little corresponding historical analysis specifically examining its emergence as a corporate marketing mainstay in the postwar era.

Part of the issue is that plenty of scholars have examined convenience but never substantively addressed the role many companies, including meat-packers, had in shaping its public perception and later acceptance. Its nearly omnipresent nature hides the depth of its influence and the influence of those who deliberately cultivated and benefited from its supremacy. Focusing on production, packaging, its relationship to specific industries, or other conceptions is not wrong. On the contrary, it is necessary for understanding the greater scope and influence of convenience. But if scholars want to understand not just how it came to be but why it has become so widely accepted by the public, convenience must also be examined from the point of view of corporate marketers. Food companies deliberately choose and then

6. Alvarez, Levin, and Sinclair, “Making Voting Easier”; Toh and Sock-Yong, “Quasi-Flag of Convenience Shipping.”

7. Horowitz, *Putting Meat on the American Table*; Hisano, “Selling Food”; Freidberg, *Fresh*; Zeide, *Canned*.

cultivated convenience as an inherent part of the modern food system. Therefore, to understand why they made this decision, the challenges they faced, and ultimately why it has become so widely (and passively) accepted, it is critical that convenience be defined and then examined from a marketing standpoint.

To begin, it is important to also define what the conception means in terms of consumption. Convenience is a perceived attribute of a product or a service that is intended to save the consumer time or labor (both physical and mental). This includes but is not limited to quick buying (store location, hours of operation, rapid checkout), easy shipping and storage (packaging and product design), and ease of use (mental selection, quick preparation).⁸ While marketing convenience focused on conserving time and effort, I argue that the successful promotion of this concept in the postwar food industry cannot be understood without examining the connection between convenience and “quality.” Without meeting some minimum standard of quality, even the most convenient of food will be rejected. As more Americans consumed more “convenient” food in the 1950s and 1960s, many had yet to fully embrace convenience as a desirable attribute of the food itself. Most people in the postwar era did not believe that food could be both convenient and of quality, especially if the product (like meat) was the meal’s centerpiece.

A critical component of this struggle for convenience centered on perceptions of gendered labor. At a time when American cultural assumptions celebrated domestic bliss and traditional family structures, the reality was that more and more women worked outside the home to meet basic household needs. These changes to their labor forced women to navigate between cultural expectations and economic reality, placing a premium on their time. Yet these housewives often declined to purchase and serve convenience products that would have, at least superficially, saved them valuable time and effort. These women believed that convenience food products lacked the quality merited by a family meal, and therefore helped subvert their feminine duty of spending *time* and *labor* on food. To gain their trust, marketers needed to address consumer perceptions of their products. They needed to convince prospective consumers that even the most important ingredient, like a Sunday ham or chicken, could both save them time and labor and also taste good. Meat-packers like Perdue Chicken and Rath Packing used various tactics to reassure customers that all of their products possessed both convenience and quality. In turn, those

8. Berry, Seiders, and Grewal, “Understanding Service Convenience.”

who successfully integrated the perception of quality did seem to make their products more convenient, as they freed women from the mental labor of product selection and the emotional burden of guilt produced by serving “convenient” products. This article analyzes where this line between convenience and quality was drawn, how it moved, and how corporate entities responded to consumer concerns.

This connection between convenience and corporate marketing matters fundamentally to historical understanding of the food chain. Marketing itself is a central point of interaction between corporate entities and the public, one that revolutionized the distribution system and created the mass market we know today. Convenience is a part of that mass market because of the clear impact it has had on daily consumer patterns. But more than just that, the study of convenience matters because of who has profited from its rise to cultural and economic dominance. Scholars like Susan Strasser have noted that companies concentrate on perceiving social changes and exploiting these changes to sell their products.⁹ So, while many consumers benefited from ease of use, corporate food processors, meat-packers, chain stores, manufacturers, and other private entities gained a more valuable commodity: the perception of economic necessity.

Growing more dominant in the postwar period, corporations involved in food retail utilized the concept of convenience to ensure their supremacy within this industry. This “cult of convenience” was an elementary aspect of their version of modern food production, a mentality they transmitted to customers through advertisements, marketing ploys, and other corporate efforts. The “cult of convenience” is a term I am using to describe the systematic mentality promoted by food retailers during the postwar period. It maintained that customers could expect food production and consumption to be less labor intensive and time-consuming without loss of quality or taste. However, this mentality suggested that convenience was completely predicated on corporate control. It was, therefore, only *through* these large businesses that customers could access these benefits. By proving that large businesses could deliver this convenience with quality to customers, specifically middle-class white housewives, food companies remade the retail landscape and further insinuated their presence into America’s grocery stores and kitchen pantries.¹⁰

9. Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed*, 3–28.

10. Though I attempt to use a variety of different sources from different companies, it is important to note that many of these come from a select few that held records open to researchers. This is relatively rare, as many corporations are hostile to outside researchers. Therefore, their openness was one of the major reasons they were chosen for this work. Outside of Perdue Chicken (now known as Perdue Farms) and Hormel, all of these corporations have either “died” or been sold off to other

The Premise

As a theme, convenience is one of the features of modern marketing. Since the 1920s, researchers and academics have documented this conception as a strong motivation in purchasing choice. While the earliest researchers viewed convenience through the lens of the actual purchase (quick buying), the postwar marketer and interested scholars recognized convenience as a perceived attribute credited to the product itself. A convenience product gave the consumer nonpecuniary benefits that could not be completely quantified, unlike coupons, which represented real time savings but were expensive for companies. A product labeled “convenient” was one that allowed consumers to “save time” for other events.¹¹ Similarly, products that “saved effort” gave customers a chance to substitute leisure activities for what once was time dedicated to labor.¹² Recent studies have shown that convenience continues to be one of the most important factors in both buying decisions and product usage.¹³

In many ways, this move toward convenience was an imperfect solution to a changing American labor market that was increasingly divorced from cultural normativity. Postwar images of the traditional nuclear family reflected the purposeful celebration of middle-class values and white familyhood as the singular ideal.¹⁴ The growing tension between these cultural stereotypes and reality required many white women to change their labor but not to let those changes interfere with traditional duties. Or as one housewife quipped, “A modern woman of today would have to be four women to be everything that is expected of her.”¹⁵ The desire for less labor in meal production came from very real pressure on female time. While the media presented an image of traditional domestic bliss (one devoid of racial diversity), women playing the roles of household manager, cook, and caregiver

firms involved in Big Agriculture. It was the relocation of direct control or “death” that allowed company records to be transmitted to academic archives. Despite their differences, agribusiness employees held remarkably similar beliefs and they acted in remarkably similar ways. Whether successful or not, all companies sought to expand their hold on the larger industry.

11. Becker, “A Theory of the Allocation of Time”; Berry, “The Time-Buying Consumer”; Holbrook and Lehmann, “Allocating Discretionary Time”; Jacoby, Szybillo, and Bemrning, “Time and Consumer Behavior.”

12. Downs, “A Theory of Consumer Efficiency”; Jacoby, Szybillo, and Bemrning, “Time and Consumer Behavior.”

13. For a better understanding of studies of convenience, please see Berry, Seiders, and Grewal, “Understanding Service Convenience.”

14. May, *Homeward Bound*, 5–10. Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 34–47, 62–80.

15. As quoted in Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 15.

increasingly had to add wage earner to the list. The immediate postwar years witnessed a large drop-off in female employment, only to see it tick upward in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1950, women represented less than 30 percent of the American labor. By 1975, that number had increased by more than 10 percent. By 1955, more women were working outside the home than had during World War II. Educational opportunities, access to birth control, increasing divorce rates, economic hardship, and other societal trends all prompted female employment across class and racial lines.¹⁶

However, despite these material changes, society's expectations for gendered labor had not changed. Social customs dictated that meal preparation, along with other traditional household management, be the responsibility of the family's female members even if they took on other duties. Despite the greater adoption of "labor-saving" technological marvels, such as microwaves or dishwashers, many women struggled to balance cultural expectations and social reality. In fact, the mechanization of the household only increased the burden on women, raising cleaning standards and relegating women to the realm of unspecialized and isolated domestic labor.¹⁷ Even appliances designed specifically to "free" women from household labor, like washing machines or home freezers, did not actually decrease their burden and instead added to the amount of time spent on chores.¹⁸ In this vein, food products that used less time and labor, what would be marketed as convenience, were a very real desire for many women seeking to balance household management and other work.

For food retailers and other observers, these changes offered new opportunities for product marketing. As the primary household spenders, women were already a target audience for companies across the diverse food industry. Even Monsanto, a corporation that rarely sold directly to the public, believed that targeting housewives was the key to developing a strong public image.¹⁹ The chemical giant noted that women bought 80 percent of a household's food and that with the growing variety of options, they could afford to be more discriminating in their choices.²⁰ Consequently, any changes to their labor (including growing pressure on their time) presented a new retail landscape to be

16. U.S. Department of Labor, *1975 Handbook on Women Workers*; Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 23–45.

17. Cowan, *More Work for Mother*; Strasser, *Never Done*.

18. Strasser, *Never Done*, 263–281.

19. Gertrude Bailey, "Speech on Public Relations," New York Dateline Luncheon meeting of the Executive Committee, April 4, 1963, p. 6, series 1, box 1, file 3, Monsanto Collection.

20. Monsanto, "Chemistry in the Service of Man: Your Food and Chemical Research," May 1953, 12–13, series 10, box 2, file 1, Monsanto Collection.

explored by interested scholars and companies alike. When speaking on the future of food and farming in America, a professor of agricultural economics at the University of Illinois observed that with the increasing number of working women, “Shoppers will be looking more and more for convenience as well as for quality and variety in the food items they buy.”²¹ An early 1950s public relations series from Monsanto noted that more women were looking for convenience in food preparation.²² In one discussion of company marketing strategies, Rath Packing Company’s W. C. Roberts remarked that supermarkets were increasing both their frozen food and hot deli meal options, looking to break into the growing market for easy mealtimes.²³

As a result of these observations, many retailers and producers steadily began to market the corporate capacity to decrease time and labor intensity for meal preparation. Saving time and labor in meal preparation was a particularly easy point of emphasis, because it represented a convenience that could be quantified in some tangible way. Time and effort could be easily measured and therefore was easily marketable. For example, consider the brand Minute Rice. Introduced in 1949 by General Foods, the name itself conveyed a message of quick meals. Advertisements emphasized that the product saved the stressed housewife “time and trouble.” Ready in less than thirteen minutes, the preparation itself was a snap, “No Washing! No Rinsing! No Draining! No Steaming! It’s Precooked!”²⁴ As a concept then, this kind of convenience could be calculated and, more importantly for the companies, perceived as consistent and efficient. By being the source of this desired consistency, companies could claim to solve dilemmas facing women, tapping into potentially fruitful markets.

Countless marketing campaigns and advertisements promoted food products as quick and easy to make. In many ways, this promotion itself was not a new phenomenon. Certainly, the canning industry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries built its consumer base by advertising consistent yet convenient to use products.²⁵ Even meat-packers had long produced goods (canned beef, sliced bacon, etc.) that

21. John A. Hopkin, “The Challenge of Serving Commercial Agriculture,” 1967, 2–3, box 34, file 359, Perdue Farms Inc. Records, Edward H. Nabb Research Center for Delmarva History and Culture, Salisbury University, Salisbury, MD (hereafter, Perdue Chicken Records).

22. Monsanto, “Chemistry in the Service of Man.”

23. W. C. Roberts, “Food Service Products,” in Marketing Strategies and Tactics, 1972, series 8, box 21, file 22, Rath Packing Company Records, MS 562, Special Collections Department, Iowa State University Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, IA (hereafter, Rath Packing Company Records).

24. Minute Rice Advertisement, *Ladies Home Journal* 70, 1 (January 1953): 7.

25. Zeide, *Canned*.

promised women easy preparation.²⁶ Perhaps no company took advantage of this perceived desire more quickly than Minnesota's Hormel. Its flagship product, Spam, was one of the first foods to embody quick and versatile meal making. Introduced in 1937, this canned meat eventually became a staple foodstuff for Allied troops during World War II. Despite Spam gaining a reputation as a poor man's ham, Hormel's ability to promote the product as a convenient and long-lasting alternative meat led to its continuous production into the twenty-first century.

On a fundamental level, Hormel gave Spam more tangible qualities than just a foodstuff. It was now a sign of both labor-saving practicality and technical prowess. Spam sold on its ease of use, versatility, and storage, not necessarily on taste.²⁷ Hormel exploited those traits to portray its product as a progressive solution to modern problems. Spam's ability to solve problems (particularly the issues of time management and storage) therefore made it a source of progress. By default, then, Hormel assumed its place as the agent of this positive change. The company believed and promoted that its use and control of science and technology allowed more Americans to enjoy the "modern" way of eating. Or as one Hormel advertisement professed, "Hormel products are designed to meet the homemaker's needs for wholesomeness, freshness and flavor, convenience and variety."²⁸

But Hormel was not the only meat processor to tap into the customer desire for convenience. Rath Packing Company of Waterloo, Iowa, also made it a point to focus its marketing on quick and easy meal making. Many campaigns emphasized the quick preparation of Rath products. One campaign scheduled in Texas during the spring of 1950 advertised "meaty, marvelous sausage ... in 3 minutes," accompanied by a comic showcasing Rath sausage's versatile nature.²⁹ Another promotion in 1967 made it a point to push retailers to display more Rath products in high-traffic areas to demonstrate their long-term shelf stability.³⁰ In a campaign closer to home, Rath salesmen in Iowa emphasized the theme of "easy suppers" made with Rath meats.³¹ Promoting what it called "Super Suppers," Rath made it a point to target the possible guilt many women felt: "Even plain, everyday suppers (and honestly now, isn't

26. Horowitz, *Putting Meat on the American Table*, 34–36, 55–69.

27. Matejowsky, "SPAM and Fast-Food Glocalization," 369–383.

28. Hormel, "Product Lines," 1971–1972, p. 1, series 1, box 1, file 43, Rath Packing Company Records.

29. Rath Advertising Department, "Ad Proof 201: Meaty, Marvelous Sausage ... in 3 Minutes," Schedule of Advertising and Proofs of Ads," 1950s, series 8, box 66, file 7, Rath Packing Company Records.

30. Rath Sales Department, "Selling Brochure—Display Rath Products," 1967, series 8, box 6, file 6, Rath Packing Company Records.

31. Rath Packing Company, "Rath Easy Suppers," in letter to Iowa salesmen, August 11, 1954, series 8, box 25, file 32, Rath Packing Company Records.

that the kind served by most folks most of the time?) are super delicious with Rath Meats on the plate!”³² Rath presented its products as a simple solution to a persistent problem. By buying Rath’s meats, an over-worked housewife could still meet the standards expected of her while saving valuable time and labor.

In terms of saving labor, Rath highlighted simple preparation and easy storage as essential elements of its products. First was the emphasis on the complete utility of all Rath products. The company maintained that its packing process made its meat uniquely practical and adaptable to different meals because the product was completely consumable. No waste products meant less mental decision making while shopping and prep time while cooking. Rath often touted its exacting trimming standards, “vacuum-sealed” packing methods, and even its “inject-o-cure” device for delivering a flavorful but completely edible product.³³ Easy preparation meant that the housewife would not waste time trimming, deboning, or defrosting the product. Rath believed this premise of a “waste-free” item to be strong marketing scheme, one that would increase sales for the company and retailers alike. One promotion leaflet argued that the “housewife enjoys every bite she buys of this waste-free product.” Items without food waste also meant receiving “more bang for your buck,” a sign of an efficient home economy. Profit, for the company, the retailer, and the customer all centered on food efficiency. The ability to combat wastefulness meant less time and labor spent on preparation, making it an innate component of convenience.

Headquartered in Salisbury, Maryland, Perdue Chicken also concentrated on how its products both tasted fresh and saved time in the kitchen. For poultry packers like Perdue, the emphasis was on convenience at the point of meal preparation, rather than longevity and ease of storage. To drive this point home, the company advertised its cold packing and shipping as key to keeping the chicken fresh and convenient for waiting customers. Perdue touted its large ice-making machines, remarking, “The ice is carefully chipped and shaved to the proper size. First the tender young golden-yellow color chickens are chilled to 34 degrees—never frozen, of course.”³⁴ The cold-packed chicken, the company claimed, saved housewives the time it took to

32. *Ibid.*

33. Rath Packing Company, “The Leanest Boiled Ham You Ever Sliced,” ca. 1960s, series 8, box 6, file 7, Rath Packing Company Records; Rath Packing Company, “Rath Blackhawk Sausages: Canned,” May 4, 1950, *Western Family*, series 8, box 6, file 7, Rath Packing Company Records; Rath Packing Company, “Ad-Mats: Now Vacuum Packed for Freshness!,” August 8–September 10, *Life*, series 8, box 25, file 1, Rath Packing Company Records.

34. Perdue Chicken, “Ice-Packed Chicken,” in Radio Commercial no. 7, 1968, box 29, file 293, Perdue Chicken Records.

defrost frozen meats. Cold but nonfrozen meat offered a sense of preserved freshness without the taste aversion produced by other preservation methods, thus freeing housewives from the emotional hassle of unhappy family members. The ability to provide cold but nonfrozen poultry was one aspect of the company's media blitz when entering the New York City market in the early 1970s.

However, it was not just postwar packers that saw convenience in time and labor as a critical tactic in drumming up sales. Companies across the food chain, even those that rarely sold directly to the casual consumer, understood that convenience could be used to better consumer relations. In Monsanto's self-published series *Your Food and Chemical Research*, the chemical giant attempted to highlight its own contribution modern homemaking. The company bragged that its ability to harness the nature of chemistry made food preparation easier for housewives. It argued that women in the past toiled with complicated cooking processes, from home baking to preservation. Cake mixes, canned vegetables, and frozen foods not only allowed the current generation ease in the kitchen, but access to a wide variety of high-quality items. As a "revolution in food purchasing and eating patterns," Monsanto helped women (and the food purchasers who chased them) get what they wanted, convenience: "Convenience of preparation is another big factor—and largely responsible for the fact that with today's foods the average housewife can prepare all the family meals in two hours and 20 minutes a day."³⁵ The mantra of less time in the kitchen means more time to enjoy other aspects of life was an attractive strategy for a number of different reasons.

Part of the appeal was not just about the physical reality of less labor, but the hypothetical benefits of saving that all-important middle-class currency, free time. Corporations involved in all aspects of the food industry marketed their products as innately tied to greater possibilities of leisure and personal improvement. One Monsanto publication maintained that chemicals made food more stable and preparation much easier, taking the guesswork out of cooking. Perdue Chicken would attempt to go even further, taking the guesswork out of buying with its successful "golden hue" campaign. Because of these corporate advancements, the modern housewife was able to have a "well-rounded" personality and more free time to pursue outside interests. Corporate research made "the job of being mother and housewife a lot easier, and the results more fun for her and her healthier family."³⁶ International Harvester's appliance department also promoted its products as leisure making, remarking that its refrigerators made it easier for

35. Monsanto, "Chemistry in the Service of Man," pp. 10–11.

36. *Ibid.*

housewives to store more food. Thus, housewives could spend less time shopping and more on other family-centered activities.³⁷

The connection between leisure time and convenience was especially a point of emphasis for kitchen gadget and appliance companies. Many company-funded educational shorts and other commercials showcased the possibilities that awaited a wife with a fully updated kitchen. In 1949, National Presto Company, an appliance company focusing on pressure cookers, hired famous actresses Spring Byington and Eva Novak to play out a dramatic tale of kitchen woe. Novak sympathized with an overworked Byington, remarking, "There were certain days when everything was just too much for me." However, with the addition of Presto's pressure cooker, Novak's sad days of exhaustion were over. Now, she claimed, "My cooking is done in the modern manner." At the end of commercial, Presto urged its audience to see pressure cooking as "a new way of cooking," designed and built by the National Presto Company.³⁸ This appliance maker was hardly the first or the last to conceive of its products as time- and labor-saving devices. In fact, the marriage between corporate-created technology and easy living was one of the most prominent tropes in the war for the housewife's dollar.

In 1956, General Motors' Frigidaire division released the *Kitchen of Tomorrow*, a short ten-minute film that demonstrated the company's vision of what future food preparation would look like when using corporate products. Featuring a long-legged and lithe housewife dancing around a kitchen that performed all the necessary tasks for her (including choosing and cooking the meals), the convenient technology of Frigidaire's "push-button magic" allowed the happy housewife to "be free around the clock," enjoying tennis, golf, and sunbathing.³⁹ Nearly ten years later, its rival, Ford Motor Company and its appliance division, also produced an industrial film on the future of the American household, titled *1999 A.D.* Ford predicted that a domestic network of company computers would effectively control all household needs, including meal preparation and cleaning. Without laborious tasks in the kitchen, this housewife of the future was able to spend more time shopping, looking after her children, and enjoying hobbies like pottery making and music. The narrator remarked that this house of the future represented a society "rich in leisure and taken for granted comforts."⁴⁰

37. International Harvester, "Men, Food, Machines...", 1950, 11, box 524, file 4532, International Harvester Central file, Mss. 6Z, Wisconsin Historical Archives and Museum Collections, Wisconsin Historical Society Library, Madison, WI (hereafter, International Harvester Central File).

38. *Food for Thought*.

39. *Design for Dreaming: Kitchen of Tomorrow*.

40. *1999 A.D.*

Clearly, this included the mental and physical labor of choosing and buying the food itself, a task largely forgotten by the film. Yet, despite some of their outlandish predictions, these films were not just fantasies for corporations. Each short made critical connections between middle-class living, convenience, and corporatization. After all, it was corporate production of technology that created these possibilities. Their control of food science and technology was central to creating this utopian world, one that freed humans from labor while still allowing them to enjoy the comforts of the world.

Corporations sought to solidify their place in all aspects of the food industry by making consumers believe they had the power to ease labor burdens and create a comfortable existence. With middle-class ideals and social realities clashing, many corporations sought to exploit desires for easy meal preparation. The postwar emphasis on consumerism and the middle-class lifestyle made “convenience” an attractive vector for corporate marketing, especially as more women juggled work outside the home with internal domestic labor. Yet these food companies also more fully integrated themselves into everyday American life, arguing that their corporate efforts were essential to “having it all.” It was this capacity to give the public what they wanted, without losing the quality they craved, that allowed companies greater access into America’s homes.

The Problem

Of course, consumers were not helpless stooges. Postwar housewives (whether in New York City or Waterloo, Iowa) were hardly passive consumers for a burgeoning agribusiness conglomerate to manipulate. Historians have long acknowledged the real power female customers wielded in bending economic forces to their will. Through resistance and adaptation, women often negotiated with companies, policy makers, and marketing experts to create America’s new economic reality.⁴¹ This continued through the postwar era, even as the cult of convenience gradually infiltrated America’s grocery stores and kitchens. While many women embraced the freedom that convenience food gave them, they also worried about its image, processing, and quality. If companies wanted to sell more of their products, they needed to successfully address those concerns.

41. Deutsch, *Building a Housewife’s Paradise*, 13–43, 183–219. For other examples of housewives as active consumers, please see Jones, *Mama Learned Us to Work*; Jellison, *Entitled to Power*.

Part of issue that corporations grappled with was general marketing taboos surrounding food processing. As more Americans became divorced from food production, especially in terms of meat handling, strict guidelines for images and promotional activity became critical. For example, the advertising firm of Byrde, Richard, and Pound Inc. begged Perdue to drop its advertising tagline that its chickens were guaranteed, healthy, and (disturbingly) less than nine weeks old. The firm suggested removing any messages that referred to the slaughter and processing of animals. In particular, the notion that the packer killed baby chicks was a nonstarter for the marketer: "Never imply that Perdue must kill something to bring the housewife her food. Never imply that what the user is eating was, at one time, cute or darling, or cuddly, or small, or tender, or needing care."⁴² The advertising firm argued these implications did not just hurt Perdue, but the poultry industry at large. Women were not going to buy products if they found the processing distasteful, no matter how convenient they found the company's cold-packed chicken. If Perdue wanted to succeed, it needed to keep "forbidden thoughts" from entering the minds of their customers.

Along with changing experiences, corporations also needed to negotiate with unmet customer expectations. Housewives throughout the country clearly had no qualms about mailing complaints for products that failed to meet their standards of taste or quality. Dorothy Athey grumbled over the leanness of her canned picnic ham and demanded another.⁴³ Mrs. Carolyn liked her poultry but expressed apprehension that the company's chickens were cooped up in the dark. She worried their unhappiness would affect the flavor.⁴⁴ Even Frank Perdue, notorious for his take-no-prisoners attitude and belief in the masculinity of free enterprise, understood that housewives (and their complaints) were key to his company's long-term success. He ordered the advertising department to carefully read and categorize each incoming letter to find patterns in their concerns. Perdue wrote to an underling, "I am not saying they are not all 'nuts' but we should see what those thought who were interested enough to write."⁴⁵ Companies, in spite of these exasperations and their own feelings of superiority, often acknowledged they needed to be careful with their primary customers. Lack of

42. Letter to Franklin Perdue from Eliot Finkels, October 29, 1970, 1–5, box 36, file 408, Perdue Chicken Records.

43. Letter to Dorothy Athey from B. G. Jenner, April 3, 1967, series 8, box 22, file 17 A, Rath Packing Company Records.

44. Letter to Tom Robinson from Frank Perdue, November 4, 1970, box 29 file 300, Perdue Chicken Records.

45. *Ibid.*

understanding, especially after unleashing the cult of convenience, could prove to be their downfall.

On the other hand, sometimes the problem had nothing to do with the consumer but the tension between public perceptions and vague definitions. Perhaps one of the more difficult elements of this marketing of convenience was its elusive nature. It is clear that many companies spent a considerable amount of time and money trying to puzzle out an exact definition and what customers' requirements were. Like taste, perceptions of convenience could be fluid and vague, often molding to specific experiences in time and place. The need for a constant yet consistent product posed serious problems.⁴⁶ For meat-packers, convenience often had a contentious relationship with notions of freshness. An organic material like meat has a rapid decomposition rate, making different preservation methods a critical component of taste. As such, the difference between canning, curing, salting, drying, and freezing was a major choice that all processors faced. Though technology often influenced what forms of preservation the packers chose, customer tastes also reshaped these methods.

Undeniably, that could be a major problem if the customers themselves did not know what they wanted. Processed food might be convenient but that did not make it taste good. One issue the pork packer Rath consistently had to confront was the negative association between freshness, taste, and various processing methods. In the past, much of Rath's success had come through its sales of canned meat, particularly different versions of precooked ham. When frozen foods became more and more popular in the postwar era (especially as refrigerators and freezers became more advanced and widespread), canned foods faced a growing negative response.⁴⁷ Even during the company's peak years of the 1940s and 1950s, Rath was well aware of this emerging problem in its process. As early as the spring of 1955, the company's marketing firm, Earle Ludgin & Company, warned Rath that the majority of housewives now preferred frozen to canned.⁴⁸ Other product testing also indicated a similar trend among customers. One experimental product demonstration showed that "people liked canned for convenience and frozen for better 'homemade' flavor."⁴⁹ Reading the writing on the wall, Rath began to move some of its production toward frozen processed meats.

46. Bliss, "Supply Considerations and Shopper Convenience," 43–45.

47. Hamilton, "The Economies and Conveniences of Modern-Day Living," 33–60.

48. Earle Ludgin & Company, "The Rath Packing Company Frozen Foods Meeting," May 26, 1955, series 8, box 65, file 8, Rath Packing Company Records.

49. Rath Packing Company, "Product Test: Frozen Corned Beef Hash Rings," August 1957, series 8, box 31, file 2, Rath Packing Company Records.

However, even Rath's move toward frozen foods presented problems for the pork packer. In particular, the intersection between social expectations, gender roles, and product image proved to be a tricky path for many companies to navigate. Facing a decrease in sales (partly due to inadequate hog production levels and changing customer tastes), Rath launched a large exploratory study to define existing attitudes toward processed meats in the late 1950s. It started with a simple interview session with eight groups of housewives and later their husbands. While the preliminary results showed a number of varying opinions, the most striking feature was disparate gendered attitudes toward what constituted an acceptable meal. Both men and women agreed that the presence of a male breadwinner constituted a "family meal," which meant that frozen, yet convenient meats were fundamentally unacceptable. The interviewed men were especially forthright in this assertion. Interviewers observed that these men believed frozen potpies and casseroles to be primarily "women's food." Researchers remarked that these men really did expect their wives "to spend a certain amount of time in the kitchen putting some efforts into the preparation of his meal. They laced their comments with such expressions as: 'The lord and master.' Big deal!"⁵⁰ The women interviewed also echoed a similar expectation. Research indicated that the women felt that their husbands deserved "something better than packaged left-overs with a commercial, restaurant flavor when he comes home after a day's work." The women openly admitted to feelings of guilt when using certain convenience products and serving such a meal.⁵¹

On the other hand, the women interviewed were not willing to completely abandon frozen prepared meats as a meal option. They pointed out the products' serviceable nature for snacks or lunches, especially when the husband was not present. In general, the women agreed that the frozen meats were more convenient and quicker to make but considered them to have an overall poorer taste. Finally, unlike their husbands (who both the interviewers and women described as "fussy"), these housewives believe that frozen premade meats could be used at family meals during emergencies or special situations. They expressed the need for tolerance from men, particularly during heavy housecleaning or social events.⁵² It was a feeling that seemed to confirm a fundamental contradiction of the postwar era, the class focus on

50. Rath Packing Company, "A Preliminary Exploratory Study," *An Exploratory Study to Define Existing Attitudes Towards Frozen Processed Meats*, 1959, pp. 1–5, series 8, box 31, file 5, Rath Packing Company Records.

51. *Ibid.*, 1–6.

52. *Ibid.*, 5–7.

convenient consumption conflicting with the reality of gendered expectations. Promises of quick meals clashed with cultural assumptions about the place of men and women in society. Though companies and their products claimed to help women, the promised reality was less assured.

Ultimately, even if these women wanted to spend less time on preparing food, social expectations of their labor caused them to question this impulse. Convenience products seemed to offer women what they desired, and yet it was clear that many women remained reluctant to accept them. Food, in all aspects of its preparation, continued to be important hallmark of female value. In this way, convenience products actually undermined women's feelings of self-worth. Companies believed that they offered what consumers wanted but failed to understand the depth of social expectations and their influence. The study itself revealed that women would not use products that could weaken their status. The surveyors observed: "[Food preparation] is a way that they can demonstrate a talent to the world—more importantly, to their families. A way to earn approval and praise, they don't want this taken from them." Other women interviewed mentioned that no one noticed their housework, but their families did notice a good meal. In the end, the researcher highlighted the importance of female gratification, "Women derive satisfaction and gratification from preparing their own meals. They are proud of their own cooking and their tables. They want their families' approval and praise for their own cooking—not someone else's."⁵³

The key, then, was for corporations to tap into this gratification. How to make women, who obviously desired quick meals, see products as enhancing their position. This was perhaps the biggest challenge many processors faced. In the public eye, convenience food could not also be high-caliber food. It did not necessarily add value to the household. Convenience products were fine under certain circumstances but lacked the quality to be considered anything but situational. This all related to the issue of what convenience could offer its buyers. Whereas it was easy for some corporations, especially those involved in mechanization, to argue that their products saved the consumer time, value in food was not so easily quantifiable. These women clearly continued to ignore convenience food part of the time, especially for dinners or in the presence of a male head of the household. If companies wanted to break into this untapped market, they needed to show that their products were not just for lazy Saturday afternoons, but Sunday night dinners.

53. *Ibid.*, 2–7.

A Solution

It was clear that if corporate processors wanted to convince women to use their products for all occasions, then their approach to marketing convenience products needed to change as well. Most importantly, companies began to address real concerns over food quality in convenience items. Buyers worried that the changes to familiar products, modifications that made them faster and easier to use, also lowered their overall quality. Convenience was therefore not a meaningful marketing tool for all food products unless it addressed concerns over consistency and value. The cult of convenience only worked if the companies reassured customers that their products still possessed other attributes that they desired; namely, taste, flavor, and quality. To be exact, convenience food also needed to taste good. Otherwise, all those amenities meant little. Having to compromise quality for speed would not be a marker of middle-class success nor would it satisfy that need for social gratification desired by many women. Living well meant eating well. It was convenience *with* quality that offered just that. Processors and packers needed to demonstrate that their products met the customers' expectations of quality. This was the linchpin in the cult of convenience, the connection that turned convenience into a marketing mainstay.

Moreover, this addition also played a particularly significant role because it unconsciously addressed the mental labor of product selection. While not often discussed and certainly undervalued, the labor of consumption was a uniquely feminine burden. As American society industrialized and production moved out of the household, retail purchasing increasingly became a critical task for women. The labor of consumption was not simply the actual process of buying, but categorizing and maintaining the pantry, balancing household budgets, managing and planning meals, and, of course, deciding which products best served the needs of the home.⁵⁴

It was here that the addition of quality did, in fact, make products more convenient. It was in the work of selecting the "best" household products that an assurance of consistent product quality was also a time- and labor-saving device. Fundamentally, it eased the mental labor of product choice, taking the guesswork out of buying itself. Just as a washing machine promised women that they would spend less physical labor on laundry, "quality" products sought to free women from the burden of decision making and guilt. A housewife no longer had to weigh pros and cons of a particular product. Instead, companies hoped

54. For information on this subject, see Strasser, *Never Done*, 202–262.

the combination of the two attributes (convenience and quality) would allow housewives to confidently (and instinctively) choose certain products, ideally their own. In this way, companies also attempted to ease the emotional conflict women felt over serving convenient food, allowing women to feel better about the value they were bringing into the home. By emphasizing quality as a necessary component of convenience products, companies both reassured their customers on one hand and helped them make decisions about what product to purchase on the other.⁵⁵

For these companies, the blending of convenience with quality fit neatly with the corporate promotion of their control of science and technology. These companies argued that their products could essentially “have it all” because they harnessed the power of scientific progress to solve the problem of inconvenience in the past. Much like agribusiness attempts to woo farmers on the other side of the food chain, companies involved in food processing also publicized how corporate expertise over scientific research and methods created products that retained the best elements of the past with the added benefits of speed, economical price, and freeing up time. By engaging in research and development, corporate retailers insinuated that they eliminated the imperfect variables of food preparation, including unwanted drudgery and wasted time, to create a perfect blend of good food and convenient living. Just as farmers could expect a perfectly controlled environment to grow crops, so too could housewives enjoy a food system that made it easier to buy, store, and make delicious and nutritious food for their families. In effect, these companies suggested that private institutions (specifically *their* institutions) brought the future to the present, once again reflecting the ability of businesses to advance human existence and solve the problems of humanity.⁵⁶

In terms of marketing, the use of “quality” was already a common theme of many advertising campaigns. Many packers had long

55. Though marketers have always been interested in consumer choice, more recently researchers have looked at the influence of “decision fatigue” on these selections. Decision fatigue “describes the impaired ability to make decisions and control behavior as a consequence of repeated acts of decision-making. Evidence suggests that individuals experiencing decision fatigue demonstrate an impaired ability to make trade-offs, prefer a passive role in the decision-making process, and often make choices that seem impulsive or irrational.” Pignatiello, Martin, and Hickman, “Decision Fatigue.” 1. Though it has often studied in terms of psychology and healthcare (where it is sometimes referred to as ego depletion), I believe that this could be particularly useful for examining the development of grocery stores and food selection. For more general information, see Luce, Payne, and Bettman. “Emotional Trade-Off Difficulty and Choice,” 143–159.

56. Weber, “Manufacturing the American Way of Farming.”

attempted to brand their products as high quality.⁵⁷ As one advertising firm put it, most companies, “try to create an umbrella of quality built around their ‘name,’ ‘A tradition of quality,’ ‘The most trusted name in Meat.’”⁵⁸ But the definition of quality tended to be vague and often difficult to describe. Though price was also an important factor in perceptions of quality, studies of the time showed that the connection between cost and quality was not necessarily linear.⁵⁹ In fact, the association between a certain product and the perception of “high quality” relied on a variety of factors. Part of the difficulty facing these companies was how to control customer perceptions that were subjective. For example, Rath spent years trying to establish its brand of hot dogs (a convenience product) as superior in quality. Yet, by the mid-1960s, it was clear that its overall strategy had failed to convince customers. As a sales meeting outline bluntly stated, “Most of these approaches attempted to establish a superiority for Rath Wieners, but it is becoming more and more evident there is no meaningful product advantage for one brand of wieners over another.”⁶⁰ Despite Rath emphasizing the juiciness or taste of its hot dogs, customers clearly were not buying into the connection. The difference between success and failure could often depend on how well corporations managed these public attitudes.

One of the most favored ways to establish meat as “high-quality” was to highlight its flavor and taste. Clearly, flavor was a critical part of any successful food commodity. Yet there was no guide to determine what the consumer wanted. As a result, companies and researchers spent a great deal of time and effort to determine customers’ tastes. Unfortunately, just like conceptions of freshness, taste tended to be difficult to accurately measure. J. O. Eastlack, the research director for Duncan Foods Company, remarked that communicating flavors was the most difficult research problem.⁶¹ However, this vagueness did not stop meat-packers from developing flavor as a key part of their advertising of convenient items. Oscar Meyer launched its “sack o’ sauce” with the tagline “fresh cooked flavor,” promising the product would add distinctive seasoning to their canned meat. Armour franks promised an “open-fire” flavor even when boiled. Rath used flavor often to try and separate its products from its competitors. Presliced bacon and

57. For more information on the history of branding, see Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed*.

58. Earle Ludgin & Company, “Rath Bacon 1966 Marketing/Advertising Plan: Competitive Product Claims,” *1966 Marketing/Advertising Plan*, September 3, 1965, series 8, box 65, file 5, Rath Packing Company Records.

59. McConnell, “The Price-Quality Relationship,” 300–303.

60. Rath Packing Company, “Sales Meeting Outline: 1966 Rath Wiener Sales,” 1966, series 8, box 6, file 1, Rath Packing Company Records.

61. Eastlack, “Consumer Flavor Preference Factors,” 38.

Canadian “steaks” (Canadian bacon) came in a multitude of different flavors, including maple and hickory.⁶² Whatever marketing tactic meat-packers decided to use, it was critical that their products embody both the convenience customers desired and the quality they required.

A Different Kind of Convenience

Out of all these meat processors, perhaps few creatively utilized the different marketing possibilities of convenience better than Perdue Chicken. Its advertising showcased just how flexible convenience could be as a marketing tool, a tactic that could supplement other campaign messages and offer its own distinctive benefits beyond just convenient meal preparation. Perdue’s unique application of convenience allowed it to outpace many regional competitors and expand its hold over the East Coast poultry market. By (perhaps unwittingly) stumbling onto the hidden feminine labor of consumption, Perdue’s “golden hue” campaign addressed unseen desires of its consumers, making their labor easier in an unintended way. While Tyson produced a greater range of poultry products and Pilgrim expanded the scope of its operations through acquisitions, this Delmarva-area company grew rapidly through smart marketing choices and a drive to exploit changing customer needs.⁶³ Perhaps the best example of Perdue’s unique approach was its ability to capitalize on the labor of retail and mental selection through tangible visual cues. Its golden hue campaign represented the exceptional versatility that convenience could offer, ultimately allowing Perdue to win a dogfight in the most competitive market in America, New York City.

The Big Apple represented a unique situation in the retail market of America. Clearly desirable for its population, potential revenue, and proximity to Wall Street, the city’s tight and expensive quarters made the turn to supermarkets and one-stop shopping difficult. Moreover, the city, with its distinct ethnic neighborhoods and the tendency of its residents to frequent specialty food stores, proved further resistant. The city’s butchers, deeply connected to their neighborhoods through their shops, still retained much of the agency that their occupational brethren had lost years before to industrial meat-packers. This meant that processors had to court local stores and butchers deeply affected

62. Rath Packing Company, “Setting the Style” and “Smoky Maple Brand Bacon” advertisements, ca. 1964, series 8, box 6, file 7, Rath Packing Company Records.

63. For more information on vertical integration of the poultry industry, see Gisolfi, *The Takeover*.

customer choices about what product and cut they would buy. Even processing methods (New York–dressed evisceration, for instance) placed control of the actual dismemberment in the hands of the local butchers, who then negotiated with the customer and cut the poultry according to the buyer’s wishes.⁶⁴

Perdue cracked this market with a well-timed media blitz and a perfect representation of its corporate superiority through the promotion of its bird’s golden-yellow hue.⁶⁵ This deceptively simple theme, a mere color change made possible by feed additives (marigold petals to be exact), proved to be incredibly successful. The color change made the company’s perceived distinction possible on a theoretical and material level (visual color as a visual sign of quality). The difference between Perdue’s golden birds and other poultry was easy to spot, so much so that it became a consistent theme in the company’s advertisements.⁶⁶ Perdue found a means to make its chicken distinctive in a tangible way. That gave its advertising an opportunity to connect that tangible distinctiveness with a perceptible difference in the eyes of their customers. It was an elegant (and inexpensive) solution to the subjective nature of quality. Advertisements could now argue that color was “built on quality” and that “when it comes to healthful, tasty nutritious food for your family, quality is always your best bargain.”⁶⁷ Perdue advertised that not all chicken was the same and that its poultry’s hue indicated “wholesome, plump, tender built-in quality!”⁶⁸ It was here that the lines between the conceptual (quality) and the physical (golden color) became blurred. If customers could literally see the difference, it could possibly bind the association between the company and product quality. No wonder Perdue told customers to “insist on golden-yellow Perdue quality. Perhaps your store will get the quality message to meet your quality demand!”⁶⁹ With a product that offered a difference the buyer could see, customer choice took on a new importance.

The branding worked, and more customers began to demand Perdue specifically from their local shops. A company questionnaire,

64. Horowitz, *Putting Meat on the American Table*, 119–121; Horowitz, “Making the Chicken of Tomorrow,” 215–237.

65. Perdue was certainly not the first company to use food dye as a marketing ploy. For more information, see Hisano, *Visualizing Taste*.

66. Wildrick & Miller Inc., “Radio Commercial nos. 1–8,” 1968, box 29, file 294, Perdue Chicken Records.

67. Wildrick & Miller Inc., “Radio Commercial no. 3,” July 16, 1968, box 29, file 294, Perdue Chicken Records.

68. Wildrick & Miller Inc., “Radio Commercial no. 4,” 1968, box 29, file 294, Perdue Chicken Records.

69. Wildrick & Miller Inc., “Radio Commercial no. 6,” July 18, 1968, box 29, file 294, Perdue Chicken Records.

completed by fifty-eight Queens butchers, showed that “the single thing that seems to impress the housewife the most is the advertising.”⁷⁰ The butchers noted that housewives had favorable comments about Perdue’s taste, bulk, and especially color. More anecdotal evidence from individual surveys suggested a similar conclusion, even to the annoyance of local shop owners. Dominick Falletti, a shop owner from Queens, noted, “Sometimes women will come in and ask for Perdue but never tell me why they like it.”⁷¹ Another butcher offhandedly commented that local housewives just depended on their butchers to sell them the best, but still admitted that some explicitly asked for Perdue.⁷² The owner of Charles Prime Meat Market disclosed that Perdue advertising changed customer demand. He remarked, “Women see all the ads and then come in my store and want to see the Perdue wing tag before they buy a chicken. If it don’t say Perdue—they not buy.”⁷³

This customer demand subtly changed the interaction between firms, sellers, and customers in parts of New York City, lessening the power of local shops and their butchers to influence consumer decisions. Before, butchers resisted the use of branding labels or “tags,” because it both inconvenienced them and weakened their power to control what birds were sold to customers. Some early poultry companies had tried to develop similar branding, only to fail when retailers would simply remove the identification.⁷⁴ But Perdue’s media campaign had made that tactic impossible. Customer demand for Perdue products required that shop owners procure more of those birds, and the golden hue made it difficult to disguise anything else as the healthy, tasty Delmarva poultry. The reduction of the local butchers’ retail influence over consumer choice and butchers’ expertise showcased the influence that corporate marketing could and would have.

Undoubtedly, this change made for disgruntled butchers. One member of Miller Bros. shop complained about Perdue’s advertising, “All the time it’s crammed down their throat Perdue—Perdue—Perdue,

70. Don Mabe, “Summation of Butcher Shops questionnaires completed between July 27 and July 30, 1971,” August 12, 1971, box 52, file 587, Perdue Chicken Records.

71. Dominick Falletti, “Perdue Questionnaire,” December 3, 1970, box 52, file 587, Perdue Chicken Records.

72. S. D. Palma Market, “Perdue Questionnaire,” December 17, 1970, box 52, file 587, Perdue Chicken Records.

73. Owner of Charles Prime Meat Market, “Perdue Questionnaire,” December 1, 1970, box 52, file 587, Perdue Chicken Records.

74. Perdue Chicken, “Sweet Bred Broilers,” 1951, revised in 1965, box 29, file 294, Perdue Chicken Records.

till now people think it's the only chicken on the market!"⁷⁵ The owner of Galante's Butcher Shop Food Market explained that housewives believed newspaper advertising and forced him to sell Perdue more than he wanted to.⁷⁶ This was confirmed by another owner, who acknowledged, "With all the ads in the paper and radio it would be hard to sell anything without a Perdue wing tag. Women demand Perdue!"⁷⁷ Some butchers were especially put out by the swelling demand and its influence over consumer decisions. The owner of Stock's Market went so far as to experiment with Perdue's tags and see if it was the advertising or the innate quality of the meat that made the difference.

I don't understand it—my customers rave to me about the wonderful Perdue chickens—yet I put a few Perdue tags on Rabinowitz and the same women still telling me how good that Perdue chicken was! It has got to be the advertising; there is just no other explanation. Me, I don't think there was a difference between Perdue and Rabinowitz, that's why I made the test.⁷⁸

What the owner of Stock's Market misunderstood was that the product itself was not ultimately what made the campaign successful. The fact that Perdue's chicken was similar to or different from other chicken did not actually matter, just as whether or not a washing machine made life easier for housewives was also inconsequential. Instead, what did matter was customer perception. Even though convenience played second fiddle to Perdue's messages about its product's quality within the marketing campaign, it still played an important role in Perdue's success, mostly because its chicken offered a different kind of convenience beyond basic meal preparation.

The labor of food for these New York City housewives entailed not just the actual preparation of the meal but all of those steps before and after. Accepting the notion that Perdue chicken was high quality (admittedly influenced by a great branding message), shortened housewives' decision-making time and freed them from the emotional struggle over what food they should serve. In turn, it also meant that the labor of buying was streamlined. Women no longer had to confer with

75. Past Owner of Miller Bros., "Perdue Questionnaire," December 9, 1970, box 29, file 294, Perdue Chicken Records.

76. Galante's Butcher Shop Food Market, "Perdue Questionnaire," December, 1970, box 29, file 294, Perdue Chicken Records.

77. Good Joe's Meat Market, "Perdue Questionnaire," December 3, 1970, box 29, file 294, Perdue Chicken Records.

78. Stock's Market Owner, "Perdue Questionnaire," December 22, 1970, box 29, file 294, Perdue Chicken Records.

butchers or haggle over price. They could simply know what they wanted and walk into the shop ready to buy. Perdue, perhaps unwittingly, had stumbled onto a winning combination of quality and convenience that dealt directly with the labor of consumption. In a time when there were more and more consumer choices surrounding more and more products, this represented a real convenience.⁷⁹ While Perdue chicken might not have been more convenient than other products in terms of *preparation* (though cold-packed chicken required less time and effort than frozen chicken), it certainly was in terms of *retail*. So, obvious difference or not, the proof was in the (marigold) petals. New York women bought Perdue's chicken by the truckload. By the fall of the next year, even radio stations that ran Perdue commercials began receiving calls demanding to know where to buy the golden chicken.⁸⁰ Perdue's creative and perhaps unplanned use of convenience showed just how powerful and adaptable the concept could be when added to marketing campaign.

The success of the golden hue campaign was representative of more than just victory for Perdue Chicken; in some ways it heralded a new era of choice and control within the food industry. The lessening of the influence of New York's butchers was part of larger trend, one hastened by the cult of convenience. It broke down existing systems of choice, fundamentally downgrading smaller retailers from their place in the retail structure. Communal points of interaction between buyer and seller increasingly moved from customer and local dealer to customer and corporation. With these changes and growing competition between brands, the ability to read consumer desires and adequately market products to fit those desires was more important than ever. As companies slowly influenced consumer opinions, they also influenced consumer expectations. Over time, people did come to see corporate products as the most convenient, most scientific, and arguably the best value in quality. By extension, the public increasingly perceived corporate processors as indispensable for living and eating well. As intense competition rendered the retail field smaller and smaller, companies got bigger and bigger, taking up more space in America's kitchens and more room on America's plates.

Perdue followed that pattern quite successfully, becoming one of the largest poultry processors in America. Back in Iowa, Rath was not as fortunate, in spite of its attempts to understand a changing market. As early as 1959, Rath recognized the new interaction between customer

79. For more information on supermarkets and brands, see Abratt and Goodey, "Unplanned Buying and In-Store Stimuli in Supermarkets," 111–121.

80. Jerry Robinson, "Internal Memo," September 14, 1971, Perdue Chicken Records.

and corporations, “with the growing domination of meat merchandising by the supermarket, the consumer [will] make her choice without the advice or skill of the butcher. Now the consumer as much or more than the retailer must be sold if we are to remain in business.”⁸¹ The displacement of local retailers meant opportunities for processors able to capitalize on this breakdown. All they needed to do was to find the right mixture of customer desires and corporate expertise.

However, by 1972, the company was still searching for its own golden hue success story. Like many pork packers, Rath struggled to interpret and then reshape consumer desires to its liking. Public perceptions continued to baffle the company’s marketing schemes, prompting marketing rep W. C. Roberts to grumble, “There has been no real pattern established on cooked foods but we know the successful ones are products which save time and labor and maintain a good quality image.”⁸² With this statement, it was obvious that Rath missed the forest for the trees. Campaigns did not need to be overly complicated, but they needed to establish *both* convenience and quality in a tangible way. Corporations that successfully leveraged their ability to bring quick, quality meals to the table further embedded themselves into consumer choices and lifestyles, making it seem impossible to subsist without their products and services. Despite countless campaigns emphasizing everything from region to flavor, Rath was never able to convince customers that its products possessed these two ambiguous qualities.

In the end, whether companies failed or succeeded, their actions helped spur the cult of convenience into the marketing mainstay we know today. Convenience met the needs of a nation hungry for quick consumption in an economy that increasingly placed a premium on time. It promised housewives a chance to ease their busy schedules and households an opportunity to enjoy the leisure time promised by a prosperous country. Its proposed ability to ease labor burdens and money problems and deliver free time made convenience one of the most popular marketing strategies in the food industry. In doing so, convenience became an essential part of the American dream.

But it was also a corporate dream as well. By seeming to fulfill the desires of a nation of consumers, convenience also partly helped fulfill the most basic goal of large agribusinesses in the postwar period: the full integration of corporatization in food cycle. Across the food chain, agribusinesses pushed customers to see not just their products as good and helpful, but corporate capitalism as completely necessary for the

81. Letter from Rath president to Rath employees, April 3, 1959, pp. 1–2, series 5, box 3, files 16, Rath Packing Company Records.

82. W. C. Roberts, “Food Service Products.”

food system. Only corporations could provide the indispensable products, expertise, and organizational skill to allow Americans to enjoy cheap and satisfying food. Convenience was just one of many successful attempts to transform a food system to corporate liking.

Whether walking through downtown New York or anywhere in the United States, it would be difficult not to see just how much convenience (and other postwar changes) have reordered America's everyday needs and expectations. Workers increasingly squeezed by unpaid lunches use microwaves to cook a convenient frozen meal. Fast-food restaurants promise an in-and-out experience for those in need of quick bite. Supermarkets swell with customers (the majority still being women) searching for the right combination of nutritious variety, quality, and can't-be-beat savings. After a long day of work (or writing an academic article), millions of tired Americans pop in a frozen pizza to save time and energy. This is the reality of American food. We are all devotees to the cult of convenience; we just don't know it.

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