The Grocer

Focus On: Ready meals and soup by Ash O'Mahony (Ashleigh.omahony@wrbm.com)
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Online Listicle to go live on 11 January: New direct to consumer ready meal services disrupting grocery

The Story

No longer are ready meal brands content to be a guilty pleasure. Today's new wave of ready meals are as guilt-free as possible – both through their culinary and environmental credentials. Take the revamped products catering for the Blue Planet II era ditching black plastic for recyclable trays, trialling wood-based packaging and recycling-friendly. The arrival of new brands in the aisle also indicates the move towards offering a higher level of cuisine. Iceland was quick off the mark with of healthy kids ready meals back in January 2017, and the past year has seen out-of-home brands enter the scene with the promise of restaurant-quality meals. So how is this changing the sector? Is the reimagining of the ready meal bringing in new shoppers? And could we be entering the era of the clean eating microwave meal?

Key themes:
Guilt free: Who is investing in their ethical credentials this year? Where are the key ready meal innovations in packaging, sustainability and wellness, and who is buying them?

Rise of the restaurant ready meals: Las Iguanas, Bella Italia, Giraffe and Ed's Easy Diner have all launched into the ready meal aisle over the past year. How could the entry of these restaurant-brand ready meals shake up the category, and who are they targeting?

Brands vs Own Label: Own label extended its lead on both chilled and frozen branded ready meals this year. Whilst frozen brands have struggled to engage shoppers this year, chilled ready meals brands enjoyed a boost in frequency and volume per trip. What can frozen brands learn from their chilled counterparts, and how can branded sectors compete with own label in the year ahead?

Missed opportunities: A survey of 1,350 ready meals in summer last year revealed the category is missing opportunities in the plant-based market. A few brands and retailers have since upped their veggie credentials with new vegan ready meal ranges. Why has the ready meal category been relatively slow on the meat free uptake? What are the options available for flexitarian shoppers in ready meals this year, and where else is there untapped potential for growth in the category?

The threat of home cooking: How has the rise of convenient services that deliver recipe boxes affected the ready meals market this year? Could the movement towards home cooking, which rose 3% over the past 18 months, challenge ready meal sales in the year ahead?

Soup: To what extent are changes in promotional activity to blame for soup losing shoppers this year? Frequency of purchase may be down for to a rise in X for £Y deals, and a reduction in TPR has led to higher average prices, but what other factors are at play here? Who in the category is innovating, and why did own label NPD sell three times as much as branded NPD this year?

Innovations:
We identify four new products for both soup and ready meals that ideally have not appeared in The Grocer before. including launch date, image and RSP.