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## Hey, Mom, Is It O.K. If These Guys Market Stuff to Us?

By JON GERTNER

In a way, the coming marketing campaign for Ozon, a family restaurant, began more than a year and a half ago, in the spring of 2003, when Patrick Benasillo met Chris McKee at a marketing conference called Kid Power, held in Orlando, Fla. Benasillo, the president of Studio D, a company in New York that designs and manufactures logos and signs for retail stores, had just attended a talk by McKee, a partner at the Geppetto Group, a New York marketing firm. McKee had discussed the appeal of fictional characters like Harry Potter and, more broadly, how kid culture had saturated consumer society to the extent that it was becoming the central creative marketing force of our era. This is indeed what McKee usually talks about. He says things like "The lifestyle of kids for the first time in history is something we study." Or "Kid culture has become the most intriguing kind of culture around." In conversation, he tends to pile up the ideas before you, drawing on children's music or comics or (most often) the films of Pixar -- "Toy Story," "Finding Nemo," "The Incredibles" -- as examples of the intermingling of kid and adult cultures, a phenomenon that to him suggests children are becoming far more sophisticated about products and entertainment at the same time as adults (he calls them kidults) are increasingly reveling in youth-based content. "Is it just that the kids want to be older," McKee asks, "or is it that adults want to stay younger longer?" When Benasillo heard McKee talk like this, he sought him out in Orlando and introduced himself. Then he told him what he had been working on.

Benasillo had an idea he was trying out at a shopping mall on Staten Island. It began as a sudden inspiration -- KidKafe, a restaurant that he imagined would give families a dinner option that was a step above McDonald's in terms of price and quality, but slightly below, say, Applebee's in price and formality. "I was trying to create this Starbucks-for-kids type atmosphere," says Benasillo, who began the initial design work early in 2002. "I wanted bright colors and curves; I wanted it to appear pretty futuristic, but not to the point that I wanted it to be a theme restaurant." Benasillo, with help from some of his colleagues at his design firm, dreamed up drinks, desserts and decor for his restaurant; he settled on the name Ozon (pronounced oh-zone) after it outscored KidKafe in focus groups. But his greatest eureka moment came at a restaurant trade show, when he found something that pulled everything together: a sandwich press with which Ozon could (1) start with a layer of parbaked bread; (2) add a sandwich filling of any type; (3) put down another layer of parbaked bread; (4) smash the whole thing together until it was hot and toasty and end up with a perfectly sealed warm discus with no visible trace of the filling inside. Here was precisely the kind of hip, futuristic branding that Benasillo was sure kids and parents would love.

Benasillo hired a chef, and the two of them designed an entire menu around the press. They soon hit on a number of kid-friendly concoctions -- the Wafflo, for instance, which was made up of scoops of ice cream hermetically trapped inside hot, round waffles (but, thanks to the "flash" toasting, not so hot that the ice cream melts). And they created a carb-loaded sandwich that Chris McKee at Geppetto says excited him to the point of near-delirium when he first heard of it: macaroni and cheese inside a steaming ball of toasted french bread.

By November 2002, Benasillo had opened a store at the Staten Island Mall; in the fall of 2003, another Ozon opened in a New Jersey mall. But then business hit a rough patch. The overhead, Benasillo says, was too high for the number of customers he was getting. Also, he realized that there was no chance his small, unknown Ozon could compete with the Applebee's and McDonald's right next door.

So last summer, Benasillo closed up the mall restaurants and decided to reopen Ozon as a local family destination, not a mall eatery. The first stand-alone Ozon opened this July near his home in Staten Island. To make sure the reopening would go well, he asked Geppetto to design a marketing campaign that would attract local customers; if things worked out, he would use these ideas for a regional expansion into franchises when the time came. Geppetto, in turn, took Ozon on as a client. McKee thought the concept was brilliant from the moment he heard about it.

Unlike most marketing agencies, Geppetto limits itself exclusively to "kid products" and "kid campaigns" for the likes of Lego, Little Tykes, Kids Foot Locker and Coca-Cola. The firm was formed when McKee (now chief creative officer), Julie Halpin (C.E.O.) and Rachel Geller (chief strategic officer) broke off from Saatchi & Saatchi in 1997, where they were in charge of youth marketing. These days, Geppetto occupies a big, airy loft space on Morton Street in Greenwich Village. It's a grown-up environment -- white walls, exposed brick, Danish modern furniture, Aeron chairs -- that testifies to McKee's disdain for the assumption that people who work in youth marketing must be a bunch of kids. McKee, who once shut down Geppetto for the afternoon to bring the entire staff to the premiere of "Spider-Man 2," said: "I really love comic books and kid shows. I get it." But if doing his work entails being childlike, that's not the same as being childish. There's a difference, he says.

Geppetto's approach to designing a campaign relies on Rachel Geller's psychological and anthropological field research on children and teenagers. For instance, Geller has helped Geppetto discern the "eight kinds of fun" and "six species of kids" and "nine principles of family branding." McKee and Halpin apply these categories systematically to the firm's accounts. This reduces the challenge of selling variable products and services to the same questions: What kind of fun will product X create? What species of kid will respond to product Y?

Every campaign begins with an "immersion day." McKee, Halpin and Geller take seats around the firm's conference table and brainstorm over a new client's needs. This can be a crowded and loud affair; a company like Campbell's, for instance, might send 10 in-house managers to an immersion day. But on a Thursday in the middle of September, Benasillo came alone. While he has other investors in Ozon (family members and friends, for the most part), he was overseeing the marketing decisions himself.

At Halpin's prompting, Benasillo explained why he started his business: "better food and a cooler place." Apart from Starbucks, his closest model was Cosi, the sandwich-bar and coffee chain. Then McKee and Halpin grilled him for the next half-hour. McKee: "When you say 'better' food, what do you mean?" Halpin: "And what are your goals here?"

To McKee, Benasillo responded: "It's not health food, but nothing is fried, and we don't do supersize. That's why I landed on 'better.' It tastes better. Is it good for you? It's better than a double cheeseburger." Answering Halpin, Benasillo said: "I want to prove my business model works. I want to provide an environment where families can talk to each other." He had specific goals: In the short term, he wanted to take in \$1,000 per day, rather than the actual \$600. Long term, he wanted to franchise Ozon around the area and, ultimately, across the country. In addition to the new flagship restaurant, he said, he had just started an Ozon food concession at the Staten Island Children's Museum and had taken over the cafeteria at a private school in the borough.

An hour passed. McKee and Halpin prodded Benasillo and debated the idea of stressing the "better" food at Ozon. Or should "fun" be emphasized instead? Should Ozon seek to steal customers from a place like Burger King, or should it focus on those who patronized casual family restaurants? They batted around more practical questions too. Could they raise Ozon's weekly revenue by increasing dinner traffic? Would they also want to brand Ozon "the hot spot" for children's birthday celebrations?



As the morning wore on and the line of questioning became more focused, McKee and Halpin leaned

■ ■ increasingly toward a mom-focused campaign for Ozon and away from a kid-focused campaign. This is a crucial distinction. In youth marketing, the mom campaign is often referred to as "the gatekeeper model" -- an appeal to the person who is making the purchasing decisions, whether they involve buying a toy or fried chicken or movie tickets. In this case, Geppetto would apply one of its models, specifically, "The Seven Faces of Mom."

Halpin explained things to Benasillo. There is New Mom on the Block, Great Expectations Mom, Vicarious Mom, All-Perfect Mom, Connected Mom and so on. With the help of a PowerPoint presentation, she projected caricatures of each type onto a screen nearby. These are not discrete kinds of people, but rather "faces" that the same mom might wear at different times and under different circumstances. "Which one of the moms is present when you are deciding where to eat?" Halpin asked the group. "All of these moms live in me. But which are we going to address here?" By way of further explanation to Benasillo, she resorted to PBS shows: "Sesame Street" is all about Connected Mom, she said. "Dragon Tales" is Millennium Mom.

Benasillo seemed confused: "Who is Connected Mom again?"

"She likes nostalgia," Halpin replied. "She says, 'I ate Campbell's soup when I was a kid, and I want to serve it to my kids.'" Connected Mom is not for Ozon, Halpin said -- the novelty of the restaurant wouldn't appeal to her. On the other hand, Millennium Mom is probably someone to keep in mind for this campaign. "Millennium Mom is very hip," Halpin said. "And it's not just Millennium Mom," she added a moment later. "We should also consider All-Perfect Mom here. All-Perfect Mom is a little bit of a policeman, but she wants to give her kids pleasure."

McKee liked this idea. To him, All-Perfect Mom represents responsible indulgence. All-Perfect Mom lets her kids have Oreos -- but not too many. All-Perfect Mom is always thinking about fun for the kid, but fun that's within reasonable limits.

"Let's pretend we're in Mom's head," Halpin said. "Finish the sentence: I wish there were a place to eat that. . . ."

"A place to eat that . . . I knew the kids were going to eat the food," McKee called out. "A place to eat that . . . feels kid-friendly." Halpin countered: "What about: I wish there were a place where . . . there was food for me too?" Heads nodded all around. Everyone agreed: this focused the brand. It communicated the notion that Ozon wouldn't be a compromise -- or a disappointment -- for Mom.

Halpin proposed a quick exercise before adjourning. "Let's do the kids' perspective," she said. "Because regardless of what we say to Mom, that's important." McKee turned to Benasillo: "After they try your food, what do they say?"

"I've always got the Wafflo," Benasillo said proudly. "No kid has ever not liked the Wafflo." Ozon can pretty much seal anything between two pieces of bread. "We've done bacon, eggs, apples, peanut butter, Fluff -- you name it," Benasillo said. "It's nuts."

Halpin suggested approaching from another point of view. "How about this from the kid?" Halpin asked. "I wish there were a place . . . that had good, interesting food . . . had no such thing as a kid meal . . . where they don't talk down to you.'"

McKee added: "That also appeals to the whole kidult thing. This isn't kids' food exactly, but it's fun and has a kid quality."

McKee then turned to Halpin: "Can we put a star next to that?"

■ he last several years haven't been kind to the reputations of people who make their living selling products

■ or fun to kids. This year, the industry has been vilified by two new books -- "Born to Buy," by Juliet Schor, and "Consuming Kids," by Susan Linn -- that put youth marketers on a moral plane not far above tobacco executives. Theirs is not a new criticism, exactly, but Schor and Linn maintain that marketing efforts directed at children have grown increasingly manipulative and pervasive in recent years -- to the point that the industry has even taken aim at children far too young to understand the ads' persuasive intent. "Somebody needs to connect the dots between marketing and the things that people are concerned about -- precocious sexuality, childhood obesity, eating disorders, youth violence, family stress, excessive materialism, the diminished creativity in children's play," Linn told me. Meanwhile, Schor argues that what marketers say they're doing (like selling to kids who are older than 10) often conflicts with their actual practices. "We have more than a third of our kids who are going to end up with weight-related diabetes -- that's a killer disease," Schor said. "And they're marketing Happy Meals to 2- or 3-year-olds. They have licensed Pepsi logos on formula bottles."

The initial campaign for Ozon, addressing mothers more than kids, would seem to sidestep some of these criticisms. But Geppetto does plenty of other work that appeals directly to children. Like many in their industry, Halpin, McKee and Geller (all of whom are parents) maintain that we live in a consumer society and that marketing to children has been part of our culture for at least the last 50 years. "Given that it exists," Halpin says, "how can we, who create this stuff, do it in a way that's responsible and fair to kids? That's the real question." McKee argues that much of this debate seems to hinge on whether kids can decide on their own if a product suits their needs. "Nine out of 10 new products for kids fail," he says. "The critics' argument against our industry is that kids are so easily manipulated. But kids will say, 'Nope, don't want it.' We do hundreds of new-product tests, and the kid has to really, really want it for it to work. Despite our best or worst intentions, we cannot get kids to buy things they don't want."

This may be true. On the other hand, it can be disarming to hear McKee note in passing how a sneaker he is marketing to preteen girls (the so-called tweens) will give them "confidence." So while Linn and Schor talk about protecting children, McKee and Halpin talk about empowering them; while Linn and Schor invoke youthful innocence, McKee and Halpin talk about youthful sophistication. The rifts show not only how differently the sides regard the role of marketing but also how differently they perceive the lives of children.

One thing that particularly distresses Schor and Linn is how youth-marketing firms use psychological research and scientific testing. Rachel Geller, the partner in charge of this at Geppetto, disputes the perception that her research is somehow exploitative. "Basically, the people who write those books have a social agenda," Geller says. "But if they were to go around America and talk to moms and kids, they would feel much more confident that families are not falling apart, that moms use good judgment and that kids can make sensible decisions. Why shouldn't kids get to choose how their shampoo smells? Or what color they want to paint their room?" To answer these sorts of questions, Geller says she tends to avoid large focus groups in favor of, for instance, a pair of friends in a private room. "We have a technique called 'sleepover,'" Geller says. "We ask kids if they like sleepovers, and they say, 'Yeah, that's great.' We say, 'Imagine you go to your mailbox and get two invites, and they're the same day and the same time. Now, for an example, one of the invites includes a party with, say, Ozon, and the other is from Wendy's or McDonald's. Which one would you go to?' Then we might ask: 'Which would your parents go to? Which would have cooler kids at it? Which would more of your friends go to?'"

It's a means of getting kids to talk about feelings and imagery in ways they ordinarily wouldn't, Geller claims.

Ozon won't require this kind of field research yet. For one thing, the campaign is more about driving traffic to a few stores than introducing a big brand over the airwaves. For another, McKee and Halpin already seem confident about which approach to take. Still, before McKee chose the direction for the creative campaign, he consulted with Geller to find out what her recent research tells her about kids' attitudes toward food and restaurants. McKee then wrote a one-page creative brief for the ensuing marketing campaign that hewed closely to what came up during immersion day. The target was a Millennium Mom and All-Perfect Mom hybrid. But she had now been fleshed out: "I am a mom with kids under 14. I am always trying to balance

doing what's best for my kid with my desire for them to have fun and enjoy life. . . . I'm always looking for new ideas, experiences, things that will enhance my children's lives." The thing is, Millennium/All-Perfect Mom has a problem: "I like taking my kids and family out to a restaurant once in a while but am frustrated by the fact that there really isn't any place to go that's good for all of us. The fast-food places have lousy food and the sit-down restaurants aren't really all that kid-friendly."

McKee wanted to present Ozon as the solution to Millennium/All-Perfect Mom. And before he and his creative team actually start writing copy and designing advertisements -- probably for a billboard, radio and Internet campaign -- he said he wanted to get the Ozon experience. So he scheduled a lunch trip to Ozon for a day in late September when he could bring key members of his creative team: Pete Bregman, Geppetto's creative director, and two copywriters, Darren Farrell and David Brenner. Benasillo would meet them at the restaurant.

**O**ne of McKee's great heroes in life is Jack Kirby, the comic-book artist and co-creator of Captain America and the Fantastic Four. In listening to McKee talk about Geppetto, you get the feeling he believes each of his firm's employees harbors a hidden Kirby-esque talent that helps Geppetto function like a team of superheroes. On the ride to Staten Island, McKee happily admitted that he thinks everyone has superpowers, or at the very least, moments of superlative insight. Bregman, his creative partner, knows everything there is to know about action figures; large plexiglass cases around his desk house a collection of nearly a thousand plastic figurines. Farrell knows everything that's going on with new music. Others at Geppetto follow movies, or skateboarding, or cars. "Every month we have a meeting to talk about what's going on in our culture -- what it means, where it's going globally," McKee said. "We recently had a long discussion of Italian spaghetti westerns."

At times, McKee's passion for his clients' products seems to include an element of hype, but there's no question that his frothy enthusiasm infects his colleagues. In taking a cue from McKee, the Geppetto creative team arrived at Ozon unnaturally excited by the prospect of trying the Wafflo and the Macocheese sandwich. Or was it just a reflection of the kinds of people McKee would hire in the first place? Bregman and Farrell were having an intense conversation about different flavors of Cap'n Crunch as they sat down. And it is probably fair to say that everyone from Geppetto was positively, almost insanely giddy about trying the Splex.

The Splex, invented by a member of Benasillo's design team and named by his wife, is two different and unmixed drinks served in a glass split vertically in half. "When I first heard about the Splex," McKee said, "I grew misty." Bregman admitted he felt the same way. What really makes the Splex is the patent-pending dual-tube straw, built for Ozon by the Crazy Straw company, that allows you to consume both drinks simultaneously. Bregman, impressed, vowed to drink at least two, perhaps three. There was no reason to doubt him; apparently he once took his colleagues to an all-you-can-eat crab-legs special at the Red Lobster in Times Square, where he sat at a table for three hours until his friends begged him to go home. "I think he had 30 king crab legs that day," said Brenner, the copywriter. (Bregman claims it was more like 60.)

Benasillo started bringing out the food: baked sweet-potato fries with marshmallow dipping sauce; baked tater tots; then the round, sealed sandwiches that Ozon calls Tostis, which usually sell for \$2.99 or \$3.99. There was a chicken-Caesar Tosti, a honey-Dijon-chicken Tosti and a buffalo-chicken Tosti. (The salads and vegetarian fare on the menu were passed over.) Amid cheers and great acclaim, the Macocheese sandwich arrived. "I think the proprietary stuff we have here -- the Splex, the Wafflo, the Tosti -- is incredible," McKee said between bites. "These could become the new standard. A new category. The chicken nugget was the last new thing. But this -- this is new. If we can come up with a name for what this is, it'll be huge."

When the Splexes appeared, the group grew silent. It was a special moment. Benasillo brought a cream soda/chocolate milkshake Splex; a Pepsi/vanilla milkshake Splex; an orange soda/vanilla milkshake Splex. (Like many of the sandwiches, Splexes cost \$2.99.) "I think I may faint," McKee said as he unwrapped his Splex straw from the cellophane. "This is just not right."

"It's dessert in a cup," Brenner said.

"I feel like Bo Derek in 'Tarzan,' where she says: 'I don't know whether to laugh or cry,'" McKee said.

"You know, I bet I could drink one of each kind of Splex," Bregman said after a few sips. "All six of them."

"I'll bet you could," McKee said.

The Geppetto creative team presented its work to Benasillo in the Geppetto conference room one morning in October. McKee's group arrived with four different campaigns, all printed in full color and bound in a spiral book. McKee opened the discussion. "What we're trying to do is generate traffic and build awareness for the Ozon brand," he said. "Ozon is so multidimensional; it's so interesting; it's like a Disney movie. Everyone here gets it. So what we're going to show you is that we wanted to take several stabs at codifying your brand message. This is our attempt to get on our knees and talk to the moms of America and tell them why they should enter into a marriage with this brand." A lot of notions that he and Bregman tossed around didn't make it this far, he said. But he expressed confidence that Benasillo would like at least some of what was inside.

Everyone was asked to open the notebooks to Campaign 1 -- an attempt to make Ozon seem like an amusement park for kids. The artwork depicted the tables at Ozon as seats on a roller coaster. "Laugh, scream and cheer -- but keep your arms inside the booth at all times," Farrell read from his copy that accompanied the illustration. "Introducing Ozon, where a party of four is just that . . . a party." Campaign 2, which appealed directly to Mom, came next; the main idea was to let her see how much fun she would have at Ozon. "It's perfect for the kid in you," the ad promised. Mom was pictured playing cards and video games.

At Campaign 3, Benasillo perked up. It also spoke directly to Mom. "You, ma'am, are a hero. Or at least your kids will think so -- when you take them to Ozon," the ad declared. Would Millennium/All-Perfect Mom like this? McKee seemed to think so. To him, that struck the perfect note -- the kids would have fun and the moms would feel good. "You see, when Mom comes home from the grocery and puts the packages down, the kids don't care about apples and cheese, but she pulls out the Cheetos, and she's a hero," McKee said. "But she doesn't always feel so good about that. That's something marketers haven't figured out yet. The win-win problem. It's very rare to feel that for Mom." This is an attempt to solve that problem, he said.

Finally, the group took a quick look at Campaign 4, where the Ozon food is the hero, rather than Mom. A picture of a Splex included the lines: "The Drink is Divided. Your Family Won't Be." The suggestion was that it had something for everyone, McKee explained.

Benasillo seemed most impressed with Campaigns 3 and 4; in fact, he was about 90 percent sold on the hero idea, although he liked some aspects of the food campaign. He would think about it for a few days. "You're like a manic genius," he said to McKee by way of thanks. "Good thing you're on the side of good and not evil."

"Only 60 percent of the time," Bregman said.

McKee conceded to the group that he has a twin brother. Cartoonishly, he raised his eyebrows. "It may be that I'm the evil twin," he said.

In late October, Benasillo called McKee to tell him that he wanted to go with Mom as hero. "Now that we got that call, we're going to start implementing the tactical stuff," McKee told me one day over lunch in the West Village. Benasillo would spend no more than \$50,000 to start. And Geppetto would focus on pushing parties and dinner. Part of the beauty of the Mom-as-hero idea, McKee said, is that it allows the firm a great deal of flexibility in different mediums. They were in the process of designing posters for phone kiosks and bus stops;

Bregman was creating mom-superhero boots and "Adventures of Mom" comic books for photo shoots in early November. They were likewise considering some guerrilla marketing techniques to gain press and public attention; mannequins, posing as moms, could change into a hero costume at a phone booth that Geppetto would set up at several busy intersections. Real-life moms would drive minivans souped-up to look something like the Batmobile to locations in New York City and hand out samples. In addition, they would target kids two other ways: by developing collectibles (a member of Benasillo's design team had created several cartoon characters to complement the Ozon brand), and by running a write-in contest, for which kids would write stories nominating their "hero" moms.

"I also want to look at this thing, if it functions locally, as something that can expand nationally," McKee said. "I want to provide Patrick with that, so that when he franchises out, he has all these ideas in play."

To generate repeat business, McKee said he was thinking about having stickers that could be placed in a comic book to create a story and be redeemed for prizes and food. The print ads would work for posters, billboards, newspapers, direct-mail fliers, handbills or anything else. They could be used anywhere in the region or the country. The same would go for the Web. It's hard to separate McKee from his own enthusiasm, but he genuinely seemed to believe that Ozon would succeed. "It's going to be huge, I'm sure of it," he said.

Benasillo was both tremendously ambitious and cautious in the same breath. His ultimate goal, he said, was to somehow surpass Chuck E. Cheese's -- a large franchise that he says is more of an arcade than a restaurant, with little regard for family eating or a family experience. And as for the future of the marketing campaign, which will start early next year, he figures cable television is the next step. Geppetto will handle that too, he said, "since I don't want it to look like the guy in an ad who's standing on the used-car lot."

Benasillo also said he sees Ozon as the next big thing. Or maybe the next medium thing. "Maybe it's not the next McDonald's," he admitted. "But it could be big within that category. You know, you could have 500 or 1,000 stores and be a big success without having more than 20,000 stores like Subway or McDonald's." In any case, he said, it has been humbling to have already failed at the shopping malls. "Coming out of the chute, we thought it was going to be an instant hit. But it's going to take work and refinement." His challenge, and of course Geppetto's, is convincing moms and kids that something novel can be right for them too. "They all say they want something new," Benasillo said. "And the first thing they do is hang a left and go to Wendy's."

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