



How Sensory Research and Advertising Redefined the Pasta Sauce Market

Sensory Research in a Competitive Marketplace

The jarred pasta sauce market in the United States was estimated to be worth \$1.3 billion in the late 1980s. Conopco's Ragu Old World Style commanded around 60% of the market when Campbell's entered with its own product, Prego Thick and Chunky. Competitors at the time included Hunt's, Classico, and Healthy Choice. To capture part of this market, Campbell's enlisted the services of Howard Moskowitz, a psychophysicist and food science pioneer, to conduct nationwide consumer surveys. This research uncovered a staggering preference: roughly one-third of American pasta consumers preferred a chunky pasta sauce. Moskowitz's survey insights led to the development of Prego Thick and Chunky.

Campbell's advertising agency, FCB/Leber Katz, relied on sensory research to develop a comparative marketing campaign, positioning Prego alongside Ragu Old World Style in an at-home chunkiness taste test. Conopco objected to the 1988 campaign, raising concerns with the three major television networks, followed by a complaint to the BBB National Programs, National Advertising Division (NAD). These complaints resulted in instructions for Campbell's to specify which Ragu variety Campbell's was comparing to Prego.

False Advertising Disputes Over Decades

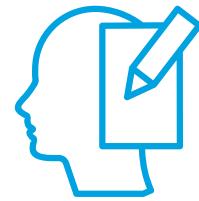
Conopco filed a federal false advertising lawsuit in 1993, and the court granted summary judgment in favor of Campbell's, finding that Conopco's delay in filing prejudiced Campbell's investment in marketing and establishment of its market position. By the time the decision was issued, Campbell's had invested over \$75 million in marketing campaigns that defined Prego as "the thick sauce".

Competitive dynamics continued into the following decades, with disputes resurfacing at the NAD in 2013 and twice in 2017. These disputes centered on claims that “even Ragu users prefer the taste of Prego Traditional two-to-one.” A Campbell’s commercial depicted two 12-month-old children, one enjoying Prego Traditional and the other refusing Ragu Old World Style Traditional. Despite a disclaimer that the taste test substantiation involved participants aged six and older, the then-owner of Ragu, Mizkan America, Inc., challenged the commercial because the depiction could mislead viewers into believing that toddlers had participated in the taste test.

Campbell’s defended the ad, explaining that the toddlers were used as a comedic device, presented ironically as “lifelong pasta experts,” and that the depiction constituted non-actionable puffery rather than a sensory claim. The NAD agreed with Campbell’s, noting that reasonable consumers would understand that it is impossible to conduct a reliable taste test using very young children and that the humorous presentation emphasized this fact.

Marketing Research Lessons for Modern Brands

The saga illustrates how comparative sensory claims, when effectively marketed and based on reliable research “reliable research, can have a substantial commercial impact. Prego’s “Thick and Chunky” campaign captured \$600 million in market share. This research uncovered that one-third of Americans preferred a chunky sauce, which became a cornerstone of Prego’s brand extension strategy. The Prego lesson that many brands follow today is to avoid launching new campaigns or products without conducting sensory research.



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Reach out to contactus@imslegal.com today to discuss how sensory research can strengthen your marketing and regulatory strategies.

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