

Using the kitchen as a happy place where couples bond

Andrew Adam Newman

IN Midtown Manhattan on Thursday, Tupperware will produce a publicity event in which Rick Goings, the kitchenware company's chief executive, will show Reggie Bush, the New Orleans Saints football player, and Peter Facinelli, the actor who stars in the Showtime series "Nurse Jackie" and in the "Twilight" films, how to prepare a meal using only food, Tupperware products and a microwave oven.



Tupperware's products have long been known for food storage; the new emphasis is on food preparation.

Before the event, called Kitchen Aphrodisiac, press invitations highlighted a recent Harris Survey, which reported that 63 percent of women find it sexy when their partners cook, compared with only 33 percent who found it sexy when the partner paid for dinner.

It would seem that Tupperware is making a typical marketing pitch to men, promising to help them seduce women.

"Not at all," said Mr. Goings, in an interview last week at the New York City offices of Tupperware's public relations firm Maloney & Fox, a part of Waggener Edstrom. "Someone said to me years ago, to catch a moose, you have to first catch moose bait. And if you want to target women, the best way is to also go after men."

Because some Tupperware products, like the Quick Chef, which chops food with a crank like a salad spinner's, are not just convenient for people who are comfortable in the kitchen but also for those who are not, Mr. Goings said he hoped the event inspires women to buy the products and get men to pitch in.

"The whole concept we want to get across to men is here's something you've been missing in your arsenal for a long time, and that's getting some kitchen skills," Mr. Goings said. "But our focus is really on women to buy the products and say, 'Wouldn't it be nice to see my husband do that?' "

But the event could elicit another response, one that Mr. Goings would be perfectly happy with, he said: what was all that about?

Tupperware, it turns out, is more interested in jolting consumers to rethink the company than in getting them to think about it in precisely one way. The 64-year-old brand, still sold primarily at Tupperware parties but also online, wants to be known for more than storage for your grandmother's macaroni salad.

"The handicap of being a very successful brand over time is that people tend to think you are what you were," Mr. Goings said. While company research suggests positive associations ("It's a warm feeling that goes back to when someone took care of me," Mr. Goings said.), the company is now focused more on food preparation gadgets than food storage, and has embraced more contemporary designs, favoring bright colors.

During Fashion Week in New York last month, a runway show by Irina Shabayeva, a "Project Runway" winner, had the unlikeliest of sponsors: Tupperware. For a collection with a flight theme, company designers made earrings that looked like feathers and incorporated plastic material into a dress so it flared like a hoop skirt.

"The most surprising accent came not from the materials of furs and feathers but from ... wait for it ... Tupperware!" Mary Hall wrote in a review of the show on the Huffington Post.

Invented by Earl Silas Tupper while he was employed in a Massachusetts plastics factory in 1946, Tupperware's food storage containers, whose seal he modeled after paint-can lids, were initially sold in stores. But sales never really took off until the early 1950s, when they were first sold at gatherings.

While they may seem like quaint relics, Tupperware parties embody what modern marketers strive for: party hosts are so-called influencers — more trusted in their communities than faceless brands. Buzz is word of mouth — guests talking up products afterward.

Companies spend "hundreds of millions of dollars on advertising, and most people don't believe it," said Mr. Goings, of Tupperware, which does not advertise. "But if a woman hosts a Tupperware party, who goes? Friends, neighbors and relatives — people who she knows and trusts."

The average Tupperware party in the United States lasts about 90 minutes and consists of eight guests who spend a total of \$400. Unlike largely passive parties of the past, hosts today collaborate with guests on a task, like using the brand's stack cooker, which allows cooking separate items simultaneously in one bowl, to prepare a quick meal.

Tupperware now sells 85 percent of its products outside the United States, up from just 30 percent in international sales in 1980. Only about 25 percent the company's sales is for food storage containers, a business that has been largely "commoditized" by retail brands like Rubbermaid and Glad, Mr. Goings said.

Tupperware containers in which food can be stored often have a secondary function, like a mixing bowl with a lid; single-purpose storage bowls tend to have some design flair, like the Stuffables line whose lids expand, or FlatOut containers, whose telescopic bowls collapse to about an inch.

The newest Tupperware catalog features Stuart O'Keefe, a photogenic chef who will appear in the forthcoming Food Network series "Private Chefs of Beverly Hills." Mr. O'Keefe, a paid spokesman for Tupperware, demonstrates products like the Quick Chef chopper, a new line of pans, and a hinged press for juicing lemons and limes. The reason he is featured prominently is not, however, to strike a chord with men thumbing through the catalog.

Fonte: New York Times, New York, 16 mar. 2010, Media & Advertising, online.