"Aunt Jemima is Alive and Cookin'": An Advertiser's Dilemma of Competing Collective Memories

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This paper discusses how a proposed advertising theme created a strategic and public relations dilemma for a team of modern-day marketing executives, when viewed in the context of the promotional history of the Aunt Jemima brand. Using collective memory theory as a framework, this article explores alternative views of the brand's image among black and white consumers in light of the proposed advertising slogan. Archival records housed in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History allow for a reconstruction of the decision scenario and provide a rare glimpse at internal agency-client dynamics. Ramifications of their final decisions are discussed.

ADVERTISING, BRAND PERCEPTION AND DIVERSE CONSUMERS

Advertisers and their agencies expend significant effort on developing creative strategies and themes for their brands. Promotional ideas are often subject to considerable debate, analysis, consumer research and evaluation prior to their public dissemination. Schultz and Barnes (1999) suggest that "brands" are created primarily through various forms of marketing communication and that consumers develop brand concepts based upon their past experiences, memories, marketplace activities, brand messages and contacts with the brand. Thus, in creating brand messages, marketers believe they must take into account existing consumer perceptions of brand image.

While the concept of branding has risen in importance in strategic marketing planning, another important development has been the recognition and acceptance of diverse consumers in the marketplace. Beginning around 1970 and accelerating through the 1980s and beyond, corporate interest in minority consumers intensified. For example, in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, interest in African-American consumers was particularly high (Davis 2002). By the 1990s, multicultural advertising had become one of the most popular marketing trends (Teinowitz 1998, Webster 1997). Thus, not only have more marketing efforts been directed at diverse consumers, but more research on the behaviors, attitudes and concerns of minority consumers has also been conducted. This is an important development because, historically, the viewpoints of minority consumers had typically been ignored by mainstream marketers. More recently, marketers have begun to give consideration to the concerns of diverse consumers when developing promotional efforts.

Purpose, Theoretical Framework and Data Sources

This paper examines how concerns about a proposed 1994 advertising campaign prompted a marketing and public relations dilemma for the Aunt Jemima brand in the context of collective memory theory. Collective memory is a sociological construct which explains how members of different social groups remember the past (Halbwachs 1992). This framework has been used to explore the development of images of U.S. presidents (Schwartz 1991, Schwartz 1997), the cultural meanings of African-American advertising memorabilia (Motley, Henderson and Baker 2003a) and the popular icon Santa Claus (Okleshen, Baker and Mittlestadt 2001). Due to a history of often stereotypical and demeaning depictions of African-Americans in advertising and promotions (Kern-Foxworth 1994), black consumers are likely are likely to bring different viewpoints and concerns to modern-day advertising efforts compared with white consumers. Given the iconic status of a historical figure like Aunt Jemima, the significance of advertising and promotion as a cultural phenomenon, and the likelihood of competing memories and interpretations of her persona among African-American and white consumers, the collective memory framework is suitable for addressing perceptions of her image as it relates to a contemporary promotional effort.

This paper illuminates a situation encountered by a team of marketing executives in 1994 concerning an advertising effort for the Aunt Jemima brand. The executives feared backlash from African-Americans over the use of a proposed phrase: "Aunt Jemima is alive and cookin' "and related images in an important multi-media campaign designed to re-launch the flagship brand. Advertising agency records housed in the Caroline Jones Collection at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History provide valuable insight into the dilemma via internal memoranda, consumer research reports and proprietary creative materials. Since it was

likely that there would be divergent perceptions of the Aunt Jemima figure in the 1990s among different consumer groups, accompanied with the idea of a "live" Aunt Jemima, the proposed creative theme presented a formidable challenge in developing an acceptable campaign. Available documents also indicate the role played by a prominent African-American female advertising executive in addressing the controversy, along with an identification of the methods used to alleviate the dilemma. In developing this paper, historical documents are used to reconstruct the "Aunt Jemima is alive and cookin'" scenario and secondary sources are used to discuss plausible collective memories among relevant social groups.

Collective Memory, Marketing and African-Americans

Collective memories are present interpretations shaped by members of social groups concerning objects, persons and events from the past (Halbwachs 1992). There can be as many collective memories as there are groups in society. In addition, objects, persons and events may be interpreted differently depending upon the perceiver's point of view and experience with the phenomenon. Further, group members may selectively retain, interpret and/or forget historical information due to current interests, needs, beliefs and ideals (Schwartz 1997). Finally, Okleshen, Baker and Mittlestadt (2001) suggest that advertising can contribute to the development of collective memory.

Since the 1960s, there has been considerable research on the topic of "blacks in advertising." Much of the research has focused on numerical representations of blacks in advertisements, indicating a significant increase in the use of black actors/models over time. Another body of research has also looked at perceptions of black models in ads, providing some evidence that white and African-American consumers perceive advertising portrayals differently. For example, studies have indicated that white consumers generally have neutral attitudes toward black models in advertisements or showed a slight preference for white models; black consumers, in contrast, respond more favorably towards black models in ads (Whittler 1991). Additional research on blacks in advertising has looked not only at the number of portrayals, but also at the nature and context of the portrayals (Kern-Foxworth 1994, Bristor, Lee and Hunt 1995). Kern-Foxworth (1994) provides extensive evidence that historical portrayals of blacks in advertising have been derogatory, demeaning and stereotypical. In reference to advertising portrayals in the 1980s and 1990s, Bristor, Lee and Hunt (1995) suggest that despite the increased number of blacks portrayed, they tended to be presented in marginalized and/or stereotypical roles. They argued "subtle racist elements that suggest inferiority" persisted in advertising featuring black talent even into the 1990s (Bristor, Lee and Hunt 1995, 56). Further, as recently as 1992, an advertising industry survey indicated that advertising executives believed contemporary advertising strategies contributed to racial problems in the United States (Ward 1992).

PROMOTING THE AUNT JEMIMA BRAND: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

It is widely acknowledged that the historical basis for the Aunt Jemima trademark is the plantation slave of the antebellum South known as "Mammy." She has typically been characterized as subservient, devoted and happy in a myriad of pop culture portrayals and has remained as one of the most enduring and controversial images of the Old South. Traditionally, Mammy has been physically depicted as a dark-skinned, heavy-set black woman who wore an apron and a bandana covering her hair.

A review of the literature reveals four key historical approaches to promoting the Aunt Jemima brand: live appearances, print advertisements, collectible premiums and the trademarked image depicted on the packaging. Kern-Foxworth (1994) and Manring (1998) have extensively documented the origin and evolution of the Aunt Jemima figure. Based on minstrel show performers of the late 1800s, the Aunt Jemima trademark was used to identify flour mixes manufactured by the Rutt and Underwood Co. and, shortly thereafter, the R.T. Davis Mill and Manufacturing Co. between 1889 and 1903. After Davis' firm went bankrupt in 1903, a reorganized firm bearing the name Aunt Jemima Mills Co. emerged shortly thereafter, underscoring the importance of the brand name. After a series of financial challenges faced by various owners, in 1925 the Aunt Jemima brand was acquired by the Quaker Oats Company, which owns it to the present time.

Live Appearances

While helping to usher in the era of convenience products, in the early 1890s, R.T. Davis decided to promote the brand by creating a live Aunt Jemima so that he could promote it with the "presence of a 'real' slave woman" (Manring 1998, 74). Davis found a woman who personified the ideal Aunt Jemima – Nancy Green - a 59-year old black maid for a Chicago judge who had been born into slavery. She had the outgoing personality, cooking skills and the ability to persuasively demonstrate the pancake mixes in public demonstrations. Davis hired Green, who made her debut as Aunt Jemima at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition (aka "World's Fair") in Chicago. Situated in a booth designed to look like a giant flour barrel, Green greeted guests, sang, told stories of the old South and made pancakes. Davis also had a souvenir button created with a likeness of Aunt Jemima and the caption: "I'se in town, honey" (Manring 1998, 75), which became a popular catchphrase of the era. Allegedly having served over a million pancakes during the six months of the fair, Green was proclaimed the "pancake queen" by fair officials and

was awarded a medal. This promotional effort was credited with generating orders from countries all over the world and averting bankruptcy for Davis' firm (Kern-Foxworth 1998, 67). Although the financial fortunes of the Aunt Jemima brand's owners ebbed and flowed over the years, a common promotional practice was to feature a "live" Aunt Jemima cooking pancakes. After Green's death in 1923, at least five other black women, sometimes simultaneously, portrayed Aunt Jemima at food stores, trade shows, theme parks (including Disneyland) and other promotional venues between 1893 and 1967. These appearances were very popular with mainstream audiences, and some greeted Aunt Jemima as a celebrity. Edith Wilson was the first Aunt Jemima to appear in television commercials in the 1950s, however, her efforts were criticized as "demeaning" by black leaders (Kern-Foxworth 1994, 68). In becoming more sensitive to the concerns of African-Americans, Quaker Oats is said to have been cautious about depictions of Aunt Jemima in later TV ads, choosing instead to focus on the product rather than a persona (Kern-Foxworth 1994, 98). The last live Aunt Jemima, Rosie Hall, played the role from 1950 to her death in 1967 (Kern-Foxworth 1994, 69). It is surmised that by this time, due to the Civil Rights movement and vocal dissention from black activists and consumers, that live appearances of Aunt Jemima were no longer socially or politically acceptable.

Print Advertisements

Around 1919, the Aunt Jemima brand was revived with a series of imaginative print advertisements produced by James Webb Young, the well-known copywriter/manager of the Chicago office of the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency, and the noted illustrator N. C. Wyeth. Together, Young and Wyeth developed a series of popular magazine ads set on a fictitious plantation featuring an amiable and heroic Aunt Jemima and her dignified owner, Colonel Higbee. According to the ads, her culinary skills not only raised Higbee's social standing, but at times literally saved the plantation from certain disaster. Over the years, In numerous ad portrayals, when Aunt Jemima spoke, she was portrayed as using Negro dialect, often mangling the English language. For example, a 1920 ad in the Saturday Evening Post depicts a smiling Aunt Jemima serving a sky high stack of pancakes to scores of whites, proclaiming:

> "Lawzee! Mekkin' pancakes is th' mos' impawtines thing ah does, than which dere ain't no better, effen ah does say so! Jes mah flour and water, on de griddle and – whuf! Dey's done honey. Grab em!"

Such ads are credited with not only attracting scores of white consumers to the brand, but also "turned Aunt Jemima from a trademark to a real Southern cook" (Manring 1998, 112). Manring argues, "Aunt Jemima was sold with the promise the buyer could appropriate the leisure, beauty and class status of the plantation South by purchasing a box of pancake flour" (Manring 1998, 111).

Dissention relative to the advertising portrayals of Aunt Jemima among blacks is documented as early as the 1920s. A rare study of black consumer reactions to two magazine ads indicated negative receptivity of the slavery/plantation association, the subservient and menial role of Aunt Jemima, as well as the physical depiction of Aunt Jemima (Edwards 1932). There was particular criticism of Aunt Jemima as an "old-time Mammy" and of the "head rag" (bandanna) she wore (Kern-Foxworth 1994, 84). Criticisms of the Aunt Jemima image by the NAACP in the 1950s and by prominent African-American leaders such as Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver of the Black Panther Party in the 1960s have also been documented (Kern-Foxworth 1994, 85-86). Leaders were largely concerned, not only with the image, but with the fact that the image and labor of "Aunt Jemima," and other black icons like "Uncle Ben" (of the rice brand), have been used to promulgate wealth among white Americans.

Collectible Premiums

Images of blacks via premium items were used to sell a large variety of products after the Civil War, with Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus (the Cream of Wheat cook) being the most recognized (Motley, Baker and Henderson 2003b). Between 1895 and the 1950s, the Aunt Jemima image was created on such promotional items as salt and pepper shakers, cookie jars, condiment holders, syrup dispensers, paper dolls and clocks. For over 20 years, Aunt Jemima rag dolls, introduced in 1906, were particularly popular and coveted among mainstream consumers (Kern-Foxworth 1994, 74; Manring 1998, 76). For example, around 1925, a magazine offer for the dolls promoted an overwhelming response from women who had owned the dolls as girls and now wanted them for their daughters (Manring 1998). The popularity of Aunt Jemima rag dolls also earned her a family: her husband, Uncle Mose, and two children, Wade and Diana. Later, these would become valuable collectible items.

There is widespread agreement that these premium items portrayed blacks in stereotypical, comedic and unattractive ways, often featuring oversized lips, eyes and/or ears and often in menial, subservient positions (Motley, Baker and Henderson 2003a). Aunt Jemima premiums were discontinued during the Civil Rights Movement due to objections from African-Americans and the NAACP who viewed the images as derogatory and demeaning (Kern-Foxworth 1994, 75; Motley, Baker and Henderson 2003a). For a time, these items fell into obscurity, and were later resurrected via collectors interested in black memorabilia. Research about the memories of these items reveals distinct differences between the perceptions of white and black collectors (Motley, Baker and Henderson 2003a). White collectors' memories of Aunt Jemima tended to be highly personal and

reminiscent of a pleasant place or relationship, such as Grandma's kitchen. Both blacks and whites viewed the items as representative of the struggles and perseverance of African-Americans, although black collectors had more ambivalent memories of Aunt Jemima. Some blacks remembered her as the backbone of two families: her master's and her own; she also was seen as a symbol of hope in the midst of challenging circumstances. However, blacks were often offended and embarrassed by the Aunt Jemima items, and recalled their significance with anger. Still other blacks believed that the items, while derogatory, were important in understanding how African-Americans were once viewed by mainstream society.

Packaging Images

The Aunt Jemima likeness which appears on the brand's packaging is perhaps the most familiar portrayal known to contemporary consumers. The Aunt Jemima trademark - established in 1889 - became particularly prominent and recognizable as packaging evolved from sacks to paperboard boxes around 1900. The earliest Aunt Jemima was physically depicted as a smiling, dark-skinned, fat black woman who wore an apron and a kerchief covering her hair.

Concerns relevant to the social, economic and political perspectives of black consumers grew after the mid-1950s. In this environment, the trademarked image became problematic for the Quaker Oats company. A supreme insult among African-Americans, for example, was to refer to another as a "handkerchief head," referring to Aunt Jemima's omnipresent bandana, or to tell a "knock-knock" joke featuring the punchline: "Aunt Jemima on the pancake box?" (i.e. "Ain't yo mama on the pancake box?"). Manring (1998, 163) provided an astute observation of these concerns:

> No matter how many millions of white Americans were pleased with and entertained by Aunt Jemima's image, a decades-old animosity toward her remained among African-Americans. That animosity was magnified in discussions that had nothing to do with Aunt Jemima's personal appearances or her products. Her name began to appear in political discussions, as a symbol of Uncle Tomism, and became a choice insult hurled by African Americans at each other. James Webb Young, in creating the Aunt Jemima campaign, had made a sort of political statement about the place of African-American labor and the virtues of the Old South order. But clearly no one at Quaker Oats or JWT ever anticipated the day when a product associated with black labor and white leisure would be a political liability. Instead, while African-Americans were demanding to be seated at lunch counters and on buses, marching on Washington, and spending more money than ever before at the supermarket, Quaker Oats was sending actresses out to play the butter-tongued slave Jemima at schools and club meetings. The time-honored promotional approach that made her famous made her infamous, too.

In keeping with the mores of the times, Aunt Jemima's image was subjected to several highly publicized makeovers. In 1968, her controversial bandana was dropped, replaced by a narrow plaid headband. The new trademark also used a head shot of Aunt Jemima, and she appeared less rotund than in previous eras. In 1989, Quaker Oats extensively recreated her look: her headgear was dropped entirely to reveal a straightened and softly curled hairdo; she wore simple pearl earrings and a dainty lace which collar peeked above the neckline of her red dress. In all package designs, her bright, broad smile remained intact, however, the depiction is more reflective of a contemporary working woman or grandmother rather than a Mammy.

A CONTEMPORARY DILEMMA IN LIGHT OF AUNT JEMIMA'S HISTORY

In 1993, the New York advertising agency Jordan, Case, McGrath and Taylor (JCMT), was asked by its client Quaker Oats Co. to develop a major advertising campaign to re-launch the Aunt Jemima brand beginning in the fall of 1994. JCMT developed and tested six proposed executions; among these, the theme "Aunt Jemima is alive and cookin'" emerged as the most compelling creative approach based upon consumer testing. Although there were several variations of the precise slogan, its essence was:

> If you want a better breakfast, you can just stop lookin', 'cause Aunt Jemima is alive and cookin'.

In an internal JCMT report discussing the results of the evaluations of the proposed creative, the "alive and cookin'" theme was described as an "assertive, memorable and very newsworthy way to relaunch the Aunt Jemima franchise and communicate a high quality/great tasting product message" (Meeting report from JMCT 3/16/93). A memo from Peter Mitchell, an account executive and major proponent of the idea, defended the theme arguing, "it evokes a link to Aunt Jemima's heritage" (Aunt Jemima Alive and Cookin; Follow-up 3/17/93).

According to a memorandum to Quaker Oats, the strategic marketing objectives of the re-launch effort were to elevate consumer perceptions of the Aunt Jemima product line, attract attention, generate excitement about the "new" Aunt Jemima, and reinforce positive aspects of the brand's equity (Aunt Jemima – Relaunch Creative Background 3/31/93). In light of new and aggressive competition in the breakfast foods sector and improvements to Aunt Jemima brand syrups, frozen waffles and mixes, Quaker Oats viewed this campaign as critical to the viability of the brand. The executives were also seriously entertaining the idea of using a celebrity spokesperson to

attract attention to the brand and help the campaign stand out from competitors' promotions. An early favorite choice for spokesperson was the African-American actress Jackee Harry (aka "Jackee"), best known for her portrayal as an attractive, sassy single woman in the 1980s primetime television sitcom "227." JMCT proposed an integrated advertising, promotion and public relations campaign with the promise, "we hope that the relaunch will not only jump start the business, but will lay the foundation for marketing the Aunt Jemima line for future growth" (Aunt Jemima – Relaunch Creative Background 3/31/93).

Based upon consumption patterns, the primary target market for the relaunch was described as Anglo consumers who were current users of the Aunt Jemima brand but who also used competitive brands; these consumers purchased 60% of the syrup, 51% of the mix and 85% of the waffle volume in the U.S. African-Americans were considered a secondary target as they consumed only 20% of the syrup, 19% of the mix and a negligible proportion of the waffle volume (Aunt Jemima – Relaunch Creative Background 3/31/93). In an effort to position Aunt Jemima products as the best tasting breakfast foods, the executives recognized early on differences in consumption motivations among black and white consumers. For example, consumer research indicated that African-Americans responded more favorably to an emotional appeal involving family, while Anglo consumers wanted tangible, product-based reasons to believe the emotional end-benefit claims (Aunt Jemima – Relaunch Creative Background 3/31/93).

Archival documents also reveal that Quaker Oats was already sensitive to issues involving perceptions of the Aunt Jemima icon and had previously conducted brand and concept testing among African-American consumers. In general, the research concluded that contemporary African-Americans did not find the Aunt Jemima figure or its advertising to be particularly objectionable. One such report, issued in summer 1992, asked respondents to indicate whether *anything* about a proposed Aunt Jemima advertising effort was offensive, using the following evaluation items (ASI report 7/20/92):

- "The original image of Aunt Jemima is stereotypical/racist"
- "The image of Aunt Jemima has been modernized/updated"
- "The name Aunt Jemima"
- "The clothing/servant's clothing worn by Aunt Jemima"
- "Aunt Jemima evokes an image of slavery"
- "No payments/residuals given to the Black woman shown on the label"
- "Aunt Jemima is Black, and the people shown are White"
- "Lack of Black people shown"
- "Offensive/derogatory towards Blacks
- "Geared towards White people"
- "Portrays a Negative Image"

Despite concerns about the "Alive and Cookin'" theme, JCMT moved forward with the idea, providing a rationale to the client and defending their recommendation as to the celebrity spokesperson (Aunt Jemima is Alive and Cookin' – Rationale n.d.). Key excerpts are as follows:

> 'Aunt Jemima is alive and cookin' is a breakthrough campaign for Aunt Jemima brand waffles, pancakes and syrup. As it is currently recommended, it has all the ingredients to achieve the Agency/Client objectives, while at the same time, break through the boredom barrier of advertising in this product category.
>
> If you want a better a better (anything), you can just stop looking…' challenges the consumer to think twice about serving anything but Aunt Jemima. Completing the thought as a rhyming couplet… 'cause Aunt Jemima is alive and cookin'" makes it memorable and appealing to consumers, both Black and White. The structure of the commercials will accommodate any product claims we wish to make, illustrated by the scripts already created.
>
> Perhaps the most exciting thing about the campaign is the recommendation to employ Jackee Harry as our spokesperson. Jackee joins other one-name stars – Cher, Dolly, Madonna, Roseanne, Charro, Lucy, Whoppie [sic], Flip Wilson's 'Geraldine' – in commanding attention and attracting fans whenever and wherever they appear. Few other personalities can transcend the negative impressions of the Aunt Jemimas of the past as can Jackee.

Early on, the "alive and cookin'" recommendation raised concerns among executives at both JCMT and Quaker Oats with respect to how African-Americans might respond to it. A late winter report articulated some of these concerns (Meeting report 3/16/1993):

> Client/Agency discussed the appropriateness of the campaign/execution for the African-American target. It was felt that this message was appropriateness [sic] to African-Americans given that they are also looking for product news and because of the warm associations/tradition that any Aunt Jemima advertising would bring forth. Agency/ C. Jones to discuss this issue further.

Peter Mitchell, a key JMCT executive and theme proponent admitted (Aunt Jemima "Alive and Cookin'" Follow -up 3/17/93):

> Alive and cookin' needs to sink in with them [Quaker Oats] a while, but I think they'll get even more excited about its potential as they begin to see

how it will work across all the elements of the relaunch).

Despite Mitchell's support, a response from Quaker Oats' brand manager Louise Wolf suggested that they proceed with caution on the idea and also carefully consider the context of the celebrity spokespersons' portrayal along with her reputation (Letter to Estrea Dworkin 3/22/93):

> As we have further learning to do on what/who Aunt Jemima is to all consumers and this research will not be conducted in time for the fall campaign; we should not represent Aunt Jemima as a living person (e.g. child hugging her knees). Also Aunt Jemima should not be referred to as an Aunt in deference to the historical 'Aunt' reference significance in the African American community... Due to the heritage and admitted baggage of the equity, the spokesperson for Aunt Jemima should be a strong, independent African-American woman, well-liked and respected by both the general market (total and non-African American) as well as the African American market. In addition, the spokesperson should be credible and motivating. Explore additional spokespeople to Jackee, should she not meet all of the above stated criteria.

In addition to soliciting input from the client, JCMT had also retained the late Caroline Jones, who ran her own advertising firm, as a consultant to the Aunt Jemima brand. Jones was an expert on marketing to African-Americans and was regarded as the most prominent African-American woman in the advertising industry (Davis 2003). With regard to the re-launch effort, Jones voiced several objections to the proposed creative effort. Of particular concern was the context of a "live" Aunt Jemima as well as copy executions developed for the celebrity spokesperson in light of the history of Aunt Jemima promotions (Letter to Susie Townsend 4/6/93). In a letter to Susie Townsend, a vice-president at JCMT, Jones not only reminded her associates of the use of live promotional appearances featuring Aunt Jemima in the past, but commented on the idea of reintroducing the idea of Aunt Jemima in a volatile racial climate. She wrote:

> Whether we like it or not, racism is alive and running rampant in American. One has only to recall the ugly incidents on college campuses recently, the bitter confrontations between Blacks and Jews in Brooklyn; Blacks and Koreans; Blacks and Italians in Bensonhurst; Blacks (symbolized by Rodney King) and the police in Los Angeles. The common denominator in each incident is Black – men, women, children – against almost every other group on each coast and all points in between. The intolerance we have for people 'not like me' is bubbling beneath the surface today more than ever, and more than ever it boils over.
>
> It is into this setting that we re-introduce Aunt Jemima. White people may have long forgotten the slaves of old, but no Black person can. Are we ready to 'forgive and forget?' Maybe. But, it should be pointed out, you don't have to <u>remember</u> the original Aunt Jemima to <u>imagine</u> her:
>
> ...there is one image synonymous with pancakes – Aunt Jemima. A smiling, chubby Black woman wearing a white apron and a red and white do-rag, who once proclaimed, 'I'se in town, Honey!

Jones continued by voicing distress over the proposed advertising copy which required the spokesperson to use the word "Honey" several times (e.g. 'How do you like them pancakes, Honey?" and "Honey, who do you think invented homemade?"). Arguing that such language established a pattern of "blacktalk" with Southern roots, Jones provided a rationale for dropping the word and using alternative language (Letter to Susie Townsend 4/6/93):

> Jackee is Black –no doubt about it. 'Honey' is, to some, a way of grabbing us and saying 'I'm Black but in case you don't see it, I'll use 'Honey' in every commercial; Black women say 'Honey' a lot. Some Black women –Beluah [sic] and Pearl Bailey – did use it. And over-used it. I remember as a child, cringing every time Pearl Bailey said 'Chile', 'Honey' and "Honey Chile.' (I cannot recall *ever* seeing a commercial where the *White* spokesperson uses 'Honey' as a handle.)
>
> Coming from Quaker Oats – those wonderful folks who brought you Aunt Jemima – it smacks too much of the days when Black folks were supposed to be happy – singing and dancing on the levee. They might have danced alright – but no one was happy. Trust me.

While dissention over the theme continued, JCMT asked Jones to provide a recommendation for an alternative celebrity spokesperson if Jackee did not test well. She provided several names, including singers Gladys Knight and Tina Turner, and actresses/actors Shari Belafonte, Robert Guillaume and James Avery (Aunt Jemima Spokesperson - Backups 4/16/93). The criteria for the spokesperson role was that the individual have: a strong, likeable personality; clearly not be confused as "Aunt Jemima;" a proven track record as appealing and popular with consumers; excellent acting abilities; able to deliver messages with varying degree of humor, soberness and/or sophistication; perceived to have roots in traditional family values but projects modern and youthful application of

those values (Aunt Jemima "Alive and Cookin" – Follow-up 3/17/93). A confidential memo to Quaker Oats a few days later reiterated the core criteria, but added that the spokesperson must be an African-American; further, it included a cautionary note (Jackee Harry draft proposal 4/20/93):

> Remember, we are not 'casting' Aunt Jemima – we are seeking an appropriate spokesperson for a complicated trademark.

Unfortunately, subsequent documents indicate that commercials featuring Jackee produced rather unfavorable results based upon consumer testing (DRI Communications Test 6/93). Reactions to Jackee were mixed, with above average "familiarity ratings" but below average "likeability" ratings in general. Analyzed by race, the data indicated that blacks were significantly more than whites to like Jackee and to see her as appropriate, interesting, convincing, sincere, relatable, knowledgeable and admirable. While whites were more likely than blacks to see her as annoying and insulting, only a small number (5% of blacks and 6% of whites) saw her as offensive. Because the test results with regard to the primary (white) consumer market were mixed, and because the testing did not confirm that specific brand benefits were effectively communicated, Jackee was rejected as a spokesperson. This outcome prompted intense and widespread deliberations at JCMT and Quaker Oats, not only as to which alternate spokesperson might be appropriate, but whether to use a celebrity at all. Bruce Guidotti, Group Director and Executive Vice President of JCMT's Client Services Division, wrote a memo to Quaker Oats describing ways to enhance the brand image, but discouraging portrayals of the spokesperson going into home to cook for people (Re: A. J. Integrated Relaunch 4/5/93). A month later, Guidotti wrote a long and passionate memo to Quaker Oats favoring the use of a celebrity, arguing that using a well-known figure would diminish the risk of the spokesperson being recognized as an "Aunt Jemima" (Re: A.J. Alive and Cookin' Next Steps 6/9/93). He wrote:

> In the context of the Aunt Jemima brand, with all its attendant baggage, we all believe that pursing this campaign without a p/s [presenter/spokesperson] represents inordinate PR risk for Quaker. The Aunt Jemima Pledge, 'Aunt Jemima is Alive & Cookin', takes advantage of what is proprietary about our equity – Aunt Jemima is a person (not an institution), Aunt Jemima is a food expert, a friend who can help me make breakfast offering that I am absolutely certain will please me and my family…If we don't in the context of our campaign supply a personality as the vehicle for this message, it leaves open to interpretation who and what this person is like…The worst is that they will supply their own interpretation, and if that is anachronistic and negative, we're in trouble. At worst (bluntly stated) it can be interpreted to say that 'racism is alive and well and that Aunt Jemima in the image of Nancy Green is still cooking in white kitchens'. Caroline Jones feels very strongly about this. Regardless of consumer communication values, we don't feel this is a viable option for the brand at this stage. The inherent risks are both as an object of satire risk (via the likes of Howard Stern, Saturday Night Live, and so on), and/or business activist risk.

After explaining why it was imperative that a spokesperson be used for the campaign, Guidotti went on to explain what type of traits the celebrity should possess, along with ramifications for the image of the brand (Re: A.J. Alive and Cookin' Next Steps 6/9/93):

> The aspects of the Aunt Jemima image and equity that we should retain and attempt to reinforce are that Aunt Jemima is a warm, caring and helpful person…On the other hand, the person we cast in this role can not have a personality that is in any way tentative or 'subservient.' Our p/s [presenter/spokesperson] has to be an independent, extremely self-aware, extremely inner-directed person who knows who they are and is self-evidently [sic] willing to defend who they are no matter what.
>
> We learned…(and Caroline Jones reiterates it now) that Quaker as a corporation, despite current good intentions and current positive actions, does not yet have the positive image in the African American community that would give it the benefit of the doubt if it does anything with the Aunt Jemima mark that is at all controversial."

Over the next year, a number of key developments occurred. Caroline Jones' agency was asked to handle a portion of the campaign targeted at African-Americans featuring the "Alive and Cookin'" theme, despite internal staff dissention about the meaning of the slogan. However, the small budget allocated to this effort - $300,000 - precluded the use of television as a media vehicle, so magazines were recommended (Aunt Jemima Print/African American Market 12/2/93). More important, further consumer testing led the marketers to select African-American entertainer Gladys Knight as the principle spokesperson for the Aunt Jemima re-launch and TV commercials. Still, concerns did not end there and Caroline Jones was asked to provide and discuss some informal input from African-American opinion leaders. In a report and recommendation to Peter Mitchell at JCMT, Jones wrote (Letter to Peter Mitchell 4/4/94):

> Results: The more senior the male, the less willing they were to analyze any negatives with the

campaign. Women, however, to a person were concerned and expressed strong opposition to the notion that 'Aunt Jemima is alive...' 'My goodness, I hope not,' sums up their reactions. They had no problem understanding the entire couplet, and the music, but they immediately zeroed in on the word, 'alive.' They also expressed concern that the final version of the jingle not be too 'churchy,' which is an additional negative associated with the former domestic, 'working in the White woman's kitchen.

Implications: Clearly, we need to carefully execute and promote the theme...Black leaders with roots in the South instinctively questioned why anyone would actually say Aunt Jemima or any personality who is indeed dead, be advertised as 'alive.' Best case would be to try and replace 'alive' with an equally compelling word, sacrificing some of the equity in the idiom.

Next best case: *never, ever have Gladys Knight making pancakes in public, especially in a racially mixed audience, where she would be perceived as the 'Alive Aunt Jemima'* [emphasis added].

The executions might suffer in any case if Gladys Knight goes too far 'South' in her delivery or singing. The South and Aunt Jemima are synonymous.

A week after Jones letter, Peter Mitchell issued a memo to Quaker Oats, reiterating Caroline Jones' concerns. However, he advocated keeping the "Alive and Cookin' couplet intact, and recommended that Jones' agency provide a public relations plan for responding to potential negative reactions from African Americans. He wrote ("Alive and Cookin" Reaction 4/13/94):

There are some African Americans (both 'opinion leaders' as well as everyday folks) who resent the Aunt Jemima trademark and really don't want to see it advertised, no matter what the campaign line is. We simply can't be held hostage by these people, but need to take steps to help ensure they keep their feelings to themselves.

Gladys Knight's association with the brand, and a public articulation of why she chose to help the Aunt Jemima brand succeed, will be our greatest asset, given the respect and admiration she holds in the African-American community.

The subsequent public relations plan for the Fall 1994 Aunt Jemima brand relaunch called for a July announcement that Gladys Knight had become part of the Quaker Oats "family" by signing a multi-year contract to be spokesperson for the Aunt Jemima brand (Re: PR – Aunt Jemima brand products 4/28/94). In addition, press conferences and receptions were recommended which would include key influencers and senior officers of African-American media outlets (such as Black Entertainment Television, *Ebony*, *Jet* and *Essence* magazines) so that Quaker could tout its corporate social responsibility and commitment to the African-American community. Further, the presence of Quaker Oats was recommended at meetings of the National Urban League, the NAACP and the Congressional Black Caucus scheduled for the summer of 1994. Finally, it was recommended that a corporate spokesperson be appointed to address potential negative questions about Aunt Jemima.

Campaign Execution and Public Reaction

The Aunt Jemima television campaign debuted in late September 1994, accompanied by mainstream press coverage. Gladys Knight was depicted as a contemporary, working grandmother, serving breakfast in a modern kitchen to two of her (real life) grandchildren while cuddling them. However, the commercial tagline was modified to say "Now You're Cookin'" (Ono 1994) rather than the controversial "Alive and Cookin'" phrase. Knight's endorsement deal was limited to one year, despite earlier proposals for a multi-year deal (Ono 1994). There was some high profile criticism by African-American opinion leaders of Knight's role in endorsing the brand. The *Wall Street Journal* quoted an African-American scholar and author who claimed:

Many black women still remember how upset they were to see the most negative, pejorative, derogatory features of Aunt Jemima projected as the prototype of black women that was more accepted by white Americans (Ono 1994).

Newsweek quoted an African-American marketing research firm owner and publisher who argued:

Aunt Jemima is a reminder of how whites saw African-Americans 100 years ago – as servants (Seligmann 1994).

The same individual suggested, in the *Wall Street Journal*, that Quaker Oats would have great difficulty in overcoming negative associations with the Aunt Jemima brand, adding:

For some consumers, there's no amount of makeover that would sufficiently offset the stereotypes associated with the name and the picture (Ono 1994).

Despite these published negative comments about the Aunt Jemima campaign, no documented evidence of criticism by black consumers was found. In addition,

popular black consumer magazines contained no references to the ads or endorsement deal.

There were also several published items in which the commercial was defended. Speaking to the *Wall Street Journal* about her role, Knight was careful to point out, "I'm not Aunt Jemima, I'm only a spokesperson," indicating that the high quality of the products, along with the modernized Aunt Jemima image – sans kerchief, "helped in my decision" to endorse the brand (Ono 1994). *Newsweek* suggested that given the campaign's contemporary appeal, perhaps it was time to drop the "Aunt" slave moniker and refer to the brand as "Ms. Jemima" (Seligmann 1994). *Advertising Age* published an editorial by a prominent African-American business owner who complimented the commercial as a "sign of African-American progress" and added (Brown 1994):

> African-Americans have much to gain by removing the stigma attached to black servants and menial laborers. Let's just rejoice that after having a black icon all these years, Aunt Jemima products now have an African-American pitchwoman.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper uses archival documents to reveal how marketing executives addressed a commercial theme and execution which some believed had the potential to significantly damage the reputation of the Aunt Jemima brand name and its corporate owner. It has been argued that since blacks and whites likely have been exposed to different views about Aunt Jemima over time (Motley, Henderson and Baker 2003a), that divergent collective memories about this marketing icon would emerge and compromise receptivity to the brand. Specifically, due to past portrayals of Aunt Jemima in various promotions, the executives feared that negative collective memories among African-Americans would taint the brand's 1994 advertising effort and create negative publicity. That the issue was given such prominent attention by both the advertising agency and its client is significant given the industry's long history of ignoring the perspectives of minority consumers.

Interestingly, despite executives' fears, backlash to the advertising effort was minimal, and it is worthwhile to discuss why. A possible explanation is that despite assumptions that black recollections of Aunt Jemima would be overwhelmingly negative, evidence of collective memories among African-Americans indicated both positive and negative views of the icon. This conclusion is consistent with that of Motley, Henderson and Baker's (2003a) research on collective memories of black memorabilia. Their work indicated that while many blacks had negative memories of what Aunt Jemima represented, other blacks held the Aunt Jemima figure in high regard: she was seen as a domestic mastermind, capable of caring for two families (one black and one white) and/or represented the backbone of the family. Another explanation for the lack of backlash concerns the transformed physical image of the Aunt Jemima trademark. The post-1989 Aunt Jemima trademark is no longer visually reflective of the slave Mammy, and her evolution may be representative of the historical evolution of black women in American society. Perhaps the modern Aunt Jemima has become acceptable in contemporary society and having a spokesperson portrayed as a working (grand)mother is consistent with this new image. In addition, younger African-Americans (under 40) may have never seen Mammy-like images of Aunt Jemima on packages, etc. and may be unaware of her slave heritage, since the bandana-clad Aunt Jemima was phased out in the 1960s. Another possible explanation is that the public relations efforts associated with the 1994 campaign launch were sufficient to quell concerns which may have been offered by the small, yet vocal minority opinion leaders who dissented to promotion of the Aunt Jemima brand. Black organizations and publications likely to benefit by having Quaker Oats sponsor events or run advertisements would be unlikely to criticize its advertising. Finally, since the TV commercial ran without the controversial "Alive and Cookin'" phrase and instead used a modified "Now You're Cookin;" slogan, the risk of an interpretation of a "live" Aunt Jemima, personified by an African-American spokeswoman was minimized. Perhaps the opinion of Caroline Jones (and like-minded executives) prevailed here, diminishing the potential for serious backlash. Given the history of the brand icon, to situate a black woman in a commercial along with the phrase "Alive and Cookin'" would have been an inordinate risk for the advertiser to take. The final execution of the advertising effort was well-reasoned and protected the integrity of a controversial brand image.

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