

Food marketers start packaging snacks like cookies and chips by their calorie count.

Goodies in Small Packages Prove to Be a Big Hit

By MELANIE WARNER

Makers of popular snacks like Oreos and Pringles have found a new way to appeal to consumers who are trying to lose weight: selling small-portion snacks by their calorie count.

Pringles, which is owned by Procter & Gamble, is introducing 100-calorie packs of its signature chips this month. The packages contain reduced-fat Pringles and have 40 fewer calories than one serving of regular Pringles.

Kraft Foods, which started the trend through its Nabisco unit, has fashioned its Chips Ahoy!, Cheese Nips, Honey Maid Cinnamon Grahams, Ritz crackers and Wheat Thins brands into 100-calorie packages. These new, slimmed-down versions are different from Kraft's Mini Oreos and its small, to-go packs of Chips Ahoy! in that they aren't just miniaturized versions of the original, but less-sugary, fat-reduced formulations that more closely resemble crackers than cookies.

Whereas a serving size of three regular Kraft Oreos contains 160 calories and 7 grams of fat, a bag of Kraft's new 100-calorie Oreo thin crisps has about 20 crisps and a mere 2 grams of fat.

Marketing experts say that the 100-calorie message, which is displayed boldly across the front of the packages, is an attempt to offer consumers a guilt-free way to enjoy what would otherwise be perceived

as an indulgent treat. "We're finding more and more that consumers want it to be easy to know the calorie content, so they don't have to search for it on the package," said Kathy Parker, a senior business director at Kraft who oversees marketing for the 100-calorie packs.

Nicholas O. Hahn, a managing director at Vivaldi Partners, a strategy consulting firm that works with the food industry, said that because big food companies were trying to

Consumers find comfort in an exact calorie count.

find more products they could market as healthier choices, the idea of portion control has become increasingly popular. "I think you'll eventually see single-portion, calorie-control packages from everyone," he said. "For consumers, knowing what to eat and how much to eat is incredibly confusing, so having portion-controlled products helps."

"Portion control" products from Kraft and Procter & Gamble have earned applause from at least one frequent critic of the food industry. "For people who feel deprived because they can't have cookies, I can

see where this is a benefit," said Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition at New York University. "A hundred calories of cookies is not anything that as a nutritionist I'm going to be the slightest bit upset about."

The Center for Science in the Public Interest, a prominent nutrition advocacy group, commends the efforts of Kraft and Procter & Gamble to help consumers eat fewer calories, but cautions that slimming down a snack doesn't automatically make it healthy. "Yes, they're all low in fat and calories," said Bonnie Liebman, director of nutrition at the center. "But they're not exactly baby carrots, peaches and cantaloupe chunks."

Ms. Parker at Kraft said she had been surprised by consumer response to the products. "Clearly, a lot of the people who are incorporating the 100-calorie packs into their diet are looking to manage their weight, but we've been pleasantly surprised at how broadly appealing the products are," said Ms. Parker, noting that sales have been "exceeding our expectations."

In an earnings conference call last month, Kraft's chief executive, Roger Deromedi, listed the 100-calorie packs as products that have helped the company boost earnings. For the first quarter of this year, Kraft announced a profit that was 27 percent higher than in the same quarter in 2004.

According to Information Re-

sources, a Chicago-based research firm that tracks product sales, Kraft's 100-calorie packs have generated sales of \$75 million since they were introduced last July, not including sales at Wal-Mart Stores, which does not supply data to research services.

The slimmed-down snacks buck trends in the fast food industry, where portion sizes have steadily grown for the last two decades. Although McDonald's did away with supersizing last year, the restaurant chain's large soda is still 60 percent bigger than it was in 1998, said Lisa Young, a New York nutritionist who has written a book on portion sizes. Burger King recently introduced its 730-calorie Enormous Omelet Sandwich, which contains one sausage square, two eggs, two slices of cheese and three strips of bacon. It has 47 grams of fat.

And that is tiny compared to the 1,400 calories and 107 grams of fat in a Monster Thickburger from Hardee's. The sandwich contains two slabs of beef, four strips of bacon and three slices of cheese.

Kraft also continues to make big sizes of its products, but the company has started giving consumers more information about how many calories they are consuming. On large packages of its Ritz Chips, for instance, Kraft prints a two-column nutritional panel, one showing the information per serving and another for the whole bag or package.

Kraft's Nabisco unit led the way with 100-calorie packages of its snack foods.

