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Client
Lean Cuisine - Patties Food Group

Title
How Lean Cuisine listened to what nobody would admit

Category
A02 Food - Packaged and Fresh

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Q1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & WHY DOES THIS CASE DESERVE AN AWARD?

In the 90s, Lean Cuisine ruled Australian freezers. By 2025, it was fighting for survival.

The frozen meals aisle had become a graveyard. Category volume was down XXX in three years. Weight-loss meals had collapsed XXX.

Lean Cuisine had been hit even harder. Fifteen consecutive years of decline, falling 3.5x faster than an already-shrinking category. Known by XXX Australians, but considered by XXX. A brand remembered, and resented.

Because this wasn't just a sales problem. It was cultural.

Among Gen Y and Gen Z women, the verdict was devastating: Lean Cuisine symbolised everything toxic about 90s diet culture. In an era of body positivity, we weren't just irrelevant, we were unwelcome.

Culture said dieting was dead, instead Australians were embracing bodies of all shapes and sizes.

But rather than taking this narrative at face value, we went deeper - listening to what nobody would admit. A tension not many were willing to say out loud. Privately, 1 in 2 Australians still wanted to lose weight. Publicly, it was taboo to say so. This was our breakthrough insight: instead of judging women about gaining weight, society now judged women if they said they wanted to lose some.

Our strategy was to invite women to do whatever they wanted with their bodies. And our new creative platform 'Listen To Nobody But Your Body' gave them permission to choose for themselves.

We changed the social norm of the brand and shed our toxic past, by being impossible to ignore in shared spaces like outdoor and radio. We built meaning in the platform through online video and sponsorship. And on digital and social we used retail messaging to put Lean Cuisine back into shopping baskets.

And it worked. A XXX sales increase while the rest of the category fell XXX. An explosion in penetration. And in brand consideration. Lean Cuisine didn't just return to growth, it repaired a broken relationship with a generation.

This paper will show how we achieved it. The importance of diagnosing the right problem. The power of listening to what people aren't saying. The need to balance long-term brand building with short-term sales tactics.

Because for the first time in 15 cold years, Lean Cuisine was heating up.

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Q2. WHAT WAS THE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGE?

FROZEN MEALS: A FALL FROM GRACE

Frozen meals were once a staple in Australian homes. But since its peak in the 1990s and 2000s, the category lost ground to alternatives; chilled meals, meal kits, dining out, home cooking, and UberEats.

The numbers tell a bleak story. Decades later, volume continued to fall, down XXX between 2021 and 2024. [1]

[CHART REDACTED]

Within the category, weight-loss meals had been hit even harder, down XXX. In 2023, major competitor Jenny Craig exited the market.

The only brand still advertising was McCain with their creative platform “There’s Something Special About Nothing Special”. But these communications ignored their frozen hearty meals and frozen diet meals, instead focusing on chips, veggies, and pizza.

The category wasn’t struggling, it was dying.

In 2023, Patties Food Group acquired a portfolio of businesses, including Lean Cuisine - one of the last brands standing. They stepped into a category many had written off.

LEAN CUISINE, A PIONEER IN FROZEN MEALS

In 1985, Lean Cuisine launched in Australia and was an immediate hit. Built on portion control and calorie restriction, it tapped perfectly into the ‘get skinny’ mood of the time. By the early 90s it was market leader, commanding 16.5% share [2].

Success, however, invites challengers. Major player McCain launched Healthy Choice. Others followed. Leadership slipped and never fully returned.

THE LONG, SLOW DECLINE IN RELEVANCE AND SALES

What followed wasn’t a crash, but something more dangerous: a slow fade.

Through new owners, rebrands and product changes, sales would occasionally peak, but the trend was only down. Lean Cuisine drifted further from relevance throughout the 2000s and 2010s.

What followed was 15 consecutive years of decline. And it started to accelerate - between 2021 and 2024, volume collapsed by XXX. In an already-shrinking category, Lean Cuisine was crashing 3.5x faster. [1]

[CHART REDACTED]

The previous owners allowed the brand to drift, with no campaign investment in years. Retailers had lost confidence in the brand.

By 2024, market share had fallen to just XXX. [1]

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The threat was real. With no recent investment and mounting pressure, Australia's major retailers delivered an ultimatum: turn it around or be delisted.

Lean Cuisine wasn't just frozen in time. It was about to be put on ice.

SOURCES
[1] Frozen Meals Australia Scan Data, based on data definitions provided by Patties Food Group (Circana MarketEdge, 2020 - 2025)
[2] "McCain's new health drive overcomes frosty reaction", Australian Finance Review (1993)

Q3. WHAT WERE YOUR OBJECTIVES? State specific goals.

For the campaign period of June 2025 to December 2025, Lean Cuisine had three objectives:

#1 COMMERCIAL OBJECTIVE: Ignite sales back into growth, by XXX
Having recently acquired the brand and investing for the first time in years, the expectations were high. And the retailers made it clear - stopping the trend wasn't enough, we needed to reverse it.

Our objective was to deliver an increase of sales by volume from XXX to XXX [1]. Or, sell an incremental XXX meals, up XXX on the previous year.

[CHART REDACTED]

#2 MARKETING OBJECTIVE: Increase penetration by XXX, from XXX to XXX
Sustainable growth would need new buyers, not just more meals from existing ones. Brand penetration sat at a fragile XXX [2]. We set an ambitious target: XXX, to XXX.

[CHART REDACTED]

This meant we needed to attract XXX new households to try Lean Cuisine.

(Note, due to the recent acquisition, further historical penetration data is not available.)

#3 BRAND OBJECTIVE: Grow consideration XXX from XXX to XXX
Awareness wasn't the problem. Consideration was. Sitting at XXX, Lean Cuisine was known but ignored [3]. To ensure a long-term recovery, we needed to shift this with a lift of XXX to XXX.

This target would meet both our short-term sales and penetration objectives, but also set us up for long-term success, delivering results long after the campaign finished.

SOURCES
[1] Frozen Meals Australia Scan Data, based on data definitions provided by Patties Food Group (Circana MarketEdge, 2020 - 2025)
[2] Frozen Meal Household Penetration Australia, based on data definitions provided by Patties Food Group, (Circana ShopperPanel, 2024 - 2025)
[3] Frozen Meal Brand Health, Kantar (May, 2025)

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Q4. WHAT WAS YOUR STRATEGY AND HOW DID YOU GET THERE?

REPOSITIONING FOR A YOUNGER AUDIENCE

Lean Cuisine's typical buyer was a Gen X woman. To drive penetration, we would have to go younger, attracting a new generation.

First, we needed to diagnose why they weren't opening their freezers to us.

Among Gen Y and Gen Z, awareness was surprisingly high, at XXX and XXX respectively. The challenge was consideration, at XXX and XXX. Only one in XXX young women even *thought* about buying us. [1]

[CHART REDACTED]

In fact, among younger Australians the 'ever bought' measure was significantly higher than consideration. XXX of this audience had trialed Lean Cuisine in the past, but something was holding them back today. [1]

To understand what, we spoke to them. And it was much worse than we first thought.

A BRAND WITH GENERATIONAL TRAUMA

Qualitative groups revealed young women didn't think the brand had just lost relevance, they resented it. [2]

This generation had grown up with mum putting Lean Cuisine in the freezer. But today, it represented the worst of diet culture. The brand was a problematic symbol, having forced impossible body standards onto women. Modern culture said the 'Kate Moss heroin chic' of the 90s was unhealthy, not aspirational.

The positioning, the advertising, and the packaging, signaled to women "you're not good enough".

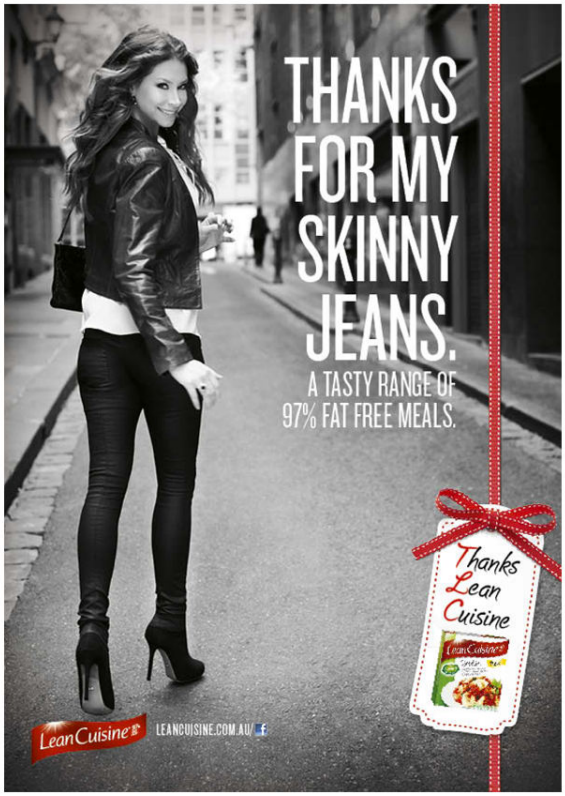
One consumer said Lean Cuisine should apologise: "They need to say sorry for how they encouraged women to look a certain way and count calories." [2]

Another captured it powerfully: "This brand gave my mum anorexia" [3]. Which may sound excessive or flippant, but this was the reality for many young women.

And you couldn't blame them, here is the kind of advertising the brand had run in recent history. See Chart 2. [4]

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PREVIOUS AD CAMPAIGNS





Source: Campaign Archive, Mumbrella (2012 & 2013)

This was more complicated than a brand who failed to appeal to modern women. We had burned bridges with the very people we needed most. Lean Cuisine body-shamed a generation of women, and their daughters said there was no place for us in their freezers.

CULTURE EVOLVED FROM BODY SHAMING TO BODY POSITIVITY

Everywhere we looked, culture told us the same story: body shaming was dead. In its place stood body positivity - a new moral code where every shape was celebrated and not judged. Women told us they didn't count calories anymore. "People aren't aiming to be lean" one said. The focus was no longer weight loss. Instead, people wanted to be strong, confident, happy. [2][5][6]

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See Chart 3 for a summary of how Australia's views on health have changed.

CHART 3

HOW AUSTRALIAN VIEWS ON HEALTH HAVE CHANGED

THEN TRADITIONAL HEALTH		NOW MODERN HEALTH
Skinny is **aspirational**	>	Skinny is **unhealthy**
Health is about **weight**	>	Health is about **wellness**
Calorie counting and restriction	>	Macros, protein, gut health, and more
How I **look** matters	>	How I **feel** matters
Body **shaming**	>	Body **positivity**

Sources
Category Exploration Research (Zing Research, 2024)
Cultural Research (Creative Agency, 2025)

Lean Cuisine was none of these things.

We were a relic of an old world, a diet brand in a society that didn't want to diet. If no one wanted to lose weight, what could we possibly stand for?

BUT SOMETHING DIDN'T ADD UP

People were telling us diet culture was dead, yet weight loss drugs like Ozempic were exploding in popularity [7]. And we were stopped in our tracks when we uncovered YouGov data reporting 1 in 2 Australians said they wanted to lose weight [8].

Culture indicated one thing, behaviour screamed another. And then we uncovered something darker.

BODY POSITIVITY HAD A DARK SIDE TOO

In one-on-one interviews, away from social judgement, the truth finally surfaced. Women didn't feel liberated by body positivity, they felt trapped by it. One said: "Instead of being shamed for being overweight, now you're shamed if you admit you're trying to lose weight" [4].

The world had swapped one form of judgement for another. From "you should lose weight" to "you shouldn't *want* to lose weight". We were still telling women what to do with their bodies.

That was our breakthrough.

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Our strategy was to reject the toxic diet culture of the past and instead rebuild consideration among Gen Y and Gen Z women by giving them agency - the freedom to love their bodies *and* work on them if they wanted to.

SOURCES

[1] Frozen Meal Brand Health, Kantar (May, 2025)
[2] Qualitative Groups, Zing Research (2024)
[3] Qualitative Groups, Creative Agency (2025)
[4] Campaign Archive, Mumbrella (2012 & 2013)
[5] Category Exploration Research, Zing Research (2024)
[6] Cultural Research, Creative Agency (2025)
[7] "How Ozempic changed everything in 2024", Glossy (2024)
[8] Audience Profiles Australia, YouGov (2025)

Q5. HOW WAS YOUR STRATEGY BROUGHT TO LIFE?

Michelle Obama said: "My message to women, do what makes you feel good, because there'll always be someone who thinks you should do it differently. Whether your choices are hits or misses, at least they're your own" [1].

This quote inspired our big idea: Listen To Nobody But Your Body.

A NEW PLATFORM INVITING WOMEN TO TUNE EVERYONE ELSE OUT

The person who knows your body best, is you. Yet the world was telling women what's best for theirs.

Lean Cuisine had previously been part of the problem, but our new brand platform told Australians something different: don't listen. Not even to our ads!

Each touchpoint of the campaign invited choice. If you're happy with your body, be happy. If you want to work on it, that's okay too. Just listen to your body.

A CREATIVE RESET, FOR A MODERN BRAND

A critical piece of the puzzle was how we showed up. To change how people felt about the brand, we needed to change how the brand felt.

We completely overhauled the look and feel. Our bold new art direction was modern, youthful, and progressive. Previously the brand had been white and skinny - now we featured a diverse cast of women. We showed Australians this wasn't your mum's Lean Cuisine!

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See Chart 1 for Lean Cuisine's bold new look.

CHART 1

A BOLD NEW LOOK FOR LEAN CUISINE



NORMALISING THE BRAND THROUGH MEDIA

The media strategy was just as important as the creative. Lean Cuisine had a social norming problem – many saw the brand as problematic and judgy. Our media strategy was built on making the brand culturally acceptable again.

So instead of hiding in digital, we went public.

We led with "traditional" channels, taking over big, unavoidable spaces where we could change the collective understanding of what the brand was. Large format outdoor advertising was unmissable, establishing our new platform. We also went big on national radio – an unusual move for a food brand who usually advertise on visual channels – continuing to strengthen the new social norm.

Creatively we reinforced this collective acceptability further, showing groups of consumers buying and enjoying Lean Cuisine together.

We extended the bold campaign through action – literally backing young women with a Melbourne Mavericks netball sponsorship. This partnership helped rewrite our story, away from skinny calorie counting, into a modern space of confidence in choosing yourself.

The netball team became part of the talent in our broader campaign, appearing in outdoor advertising and radio. Players shared their stories on social, how people in their lives had told them what to do with their bodies and why they were no longer listening to anyone but themselves.

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Of course, digital played a key role too in driving reach among Gen Y and Gen Z. Influencers brought scale and further diversity to campaign, with different women sharing what they weren't listening to. A series of brand videos carried the message across catch-up TV and streaming services, YouTube and social, each time reminding our audience of all the voices they could ignore. Except their own.

TURNING RELEVANCE INTO SALES
This wasn't just about changing minds - we had to move meals off the shelf. So, we brought the platform right to the moment of decision, with media on the path to purchase around supermarkets, and in-store activity which turned permission into purchase. Highly targeted and day-parted digital and social placements showed the brand at its most appetising, reminding people how yummy it was to listen to yourself.

See the Creative Reel for a taste of how the integrated campaign came to life.

SOURCES
[1] "Michelle Obama's tips for being happy, healthy", Today (2009)

Q6. HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT YOUR CAMPAIGN WAS SUCCESSFUL?

We had three objectives to deliver between the campaign period of June 2025 to December 2025.

#1 COMMERCIAL OBJECTIVE: Ignite sales back into growth, by XXX
Our target was to reverse the long-term trend, increasing sales volume to XXX meals, up XXX year-on-year. We surpassed our wildest expectations - the campaign delivered XXX meals, up XXX year-on year! [1]

This was well above our target and well above the previous three years of sales.

[CHART REDACTED]

Incredibly, we achieved this while the rest of the frozen meals category continued to fall, down XXX year-on-year.

Market share increased from XXX to XXX during the campaign [1].

Lean Cuisine wasn't just back in culture, it was back in baskets.

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#2 MARKETING OBJECTIVE: Increase penetration by XXX, from XXX to XXX
As a result of the campaign, penetration increased to XXX, up XXX from XXX prior to the period [2].

[CHART REDACTED]

Our target was to acquire XXX new households to try the brand. We delivered XXX.

For the first time in a long time, new customers were buying Lean Cuisine.

#3 BRAND OBJECTIVE: Grow consideration XXX from XXX to XXX
Brand consideration grew from XXX prior to the campaign, to XXX in December 2025, up XXX. Among our target audience the growth was even higher, up XXX for Gen Y and XXX for Gen Z. [3]

This result demonstrates impact on the long-term value of the brand, not just short-term sales effects.

AD TESTING
To truly understand the impact of the campaign and isolate external effects, ad testing was conducted in December 2025. This measured both people who were exposed to the campaign (experiment) and people who were not (control).

[CHART REDACTED]

The results demonstrate a clear lift in every stage of Lean Cuisine's brand health funnel, notably a XXX lift in consideration, XXX lift in trial, and a XXX in regular purchase. [4]

LONG-TERM BRAND BUILDING, NOT JUST SHORT-TERM SALES
While the campaign finished in December 2025, we want to highlight the ongoing commercial impact the repositioning and communications had.

In the following three months, the trend continued - selling an additional XXX meals (or XXX) compared to the same quarter in the previous year. Growth sustained after the campaign ended.

[CHART REDACTED]

Likewise penetration continued to grow. By the end of March 2026, the number of households buying Lean Cuisine climbed a further XXX, to XXX. [2]

This demonstrates the campaign's impact in not only driving short-term sales, but meaningful long-term growth and future sales too.

SOURCES
[1] Frozen Meals Australia Scan Data, based on data definitions provided by Patties Food Group (Circana MarketEdge, 2020 - 2025)
[2] Frozen Meal Household Penetration Australia, based on data definitions provided by Patties Food Group, (Circana ShopperPanel, 2024 - 2026)
[3] Frozen Meal Brand Health, The Strategies Research (December, 2025)
[4] Lean Cuisine Campaign Ad Testing, The Strategies Research (December 2025)

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Q7. WAS THE CAMPAIGN A GOOD INVESTMENT?

There's a few ways to assess if the campaign was a good investment.

LIFT IN SHORT-TERM PROFIT
Firstly, by calculating the lift in profit between the campaign period and the same period in the previous year.

The difference between these two periods was XXX in sales [1]. With a margin of XXX, our incremental profit was XXX [2].

The creative investment was XXX, and our media investment was XXX (which includes sponsorship of the netball team). The combined investment was XXX.

This gives us a profit ROI of 1.1x. But this assumes sales would have been flat had we not intervened. In reality, the rest of the category fell XXX during the period. If we assume Lean Cuisine would have experienced a similar decline, then sales growth was actually XXX and **our short-term profit ROI was 1.3x**.

The problem with the above is, it really only reflects short-term value. The truth is, we weren't expecting to even break even during the campaign period. Turning brands around is a long, slow journey. And while we could have invested more to drive short term-sales, we balanced this with building future demand for long-term, sustainable growth.

And this strategic decision paid off. When we factor in the additional XXX in profit delivered in the three months after the campaign ended, our profit ROI increases to 1.6x. Or if you allow for the ongoing category decline and assume Lean Cuisine would have continued to dip, **our medium-term profit ROI increases to 1.8x**.

For context, WARC's median profit ROI for all successful effectiveness case studies in the food category, between 2000-2025, is just 1.4x. [3]

NEW CUSTOMER LIFETIME VALUE
As an alternative, we can better capture the long-term value created by calculating the customer lifetime value of new buyers acquired during the period.

The formula for this is:

XXX (average price per meal) [1]
x
XXX (average annual purchase frequency of Lean Cuisine) [1]
x
2.3 (average years active) [4]
=
XXX (average customer lifetime value)

This is multiplied by the XXX new households acquired, to generate XXX in incremental forecast revenue. With a profit margin of XXX, our incremental profit is XXX.

Therefore, **our long-term profit ROI was 2.4x**.

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If you were feeling generous, you could use the higher penetration achieved in the three months following the campaign. This additional XXX households increases revenue growth to a total of XXX and profit to XXX. Then our profit ROI becomes 3.5x.

RETAILER CONFIDENCE
However you cut it, the campaign turned around a toxic brand in long-term decline while delivering both short and long-term profit.

But lastly, and perhaps the most important measure of success, is the conversation with retailers.

Where they were once questioning whether Lean Cuisine deserved a place on shelf, now they're exploring additional ranging.

Lean Cuisine wasn't thawing out, it was steaming hot.

SOURCES
[1] Frozen Meals Australia Scan Data, based on data definitions provided by Patties Food Group (Circana MarketEdge, 2020 - 2026)
[2] Internal Finance Report (Patties Food Group, 2025)
[3] "How advertising campaigns are getting more efficient", WARC (2025)
[4] "Exploring the incidence and antecedents of buying an FMCG brand for the first time", Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, based on average 2.5, using conservative assumption of 2.3 (Bogomolova, Anesbury, Lockshin, Kapulski & Bogomolova, 2019)

Q8. DEMONSTRATE THAT THE RESULT WAS NOT DUE TO OTHER FACTORS

Were the results due to changes in price, sales promotions, or distribution?
No, these elements remained consistent year-on-year.

Were the results due to category growth?
No, the rest of the category declined XXX. [1]

Were the results due to new product launches?
The brand did launch four new varieties, but these accounted for just XXX of volume [1]. Three existing varieties were also delisted, so there was limited improvement in physical availability.

Were the results due to packaging changes?
The packaging was refreshed just prior to the campaign, which was part of the strategy to modernise the brand and signal change. While this may have helped drive some conversion at shelf, the brand health and ad tracking results demonstrate a broader impact that could not have been achieved through packaging changes alone.

Ehernberg-Bass Institute research has shown that "nine in ten redesigns fail to deliver a meaningful sales lift", particularly in the short-term as it can "interfere with consumers' ability to find and buy the brand." [2]. For comparison, the last packaging refresh in 2020 had no impact on sales [1].

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Did Lean Cuisine outspend the category in media?
While Lean Cuisine's share of voice was up, we were still outspent by major competitor McCain who invested at least XXX in media in 2025 [3]. And this data is significantly underreported, not accurately capturing digital channels. Although we do note this activity was largely masterbrand work, supporting all McCain products not just frozen meals.

The big question: did sales just go up because you invested in media for the first time in a few years?
The answer is: of course. Upweighting investment in media was a key part of the growth strategy. But! Given how toxic the brand was, had we run existing creative, or did not uncover our insight, we may have reinforced past perceptions and made the situation worse.

For comparison, Lean Cuisine's previous campaign in 2023, delivered only a XXX lift in year-on-year sales [1].

SOURCES
[1] Frozen Meals Australia Scan Data, based on data definitions provided by Patties Food Group (Circana MarketEdge, 2020 - 2025)
[2] "The role of market research in pack redesign performance", International Journal of Market Research (Caruso, Romaniuk, Page & Anesbury, 2024)
[3] Frozen Meals Share of Voice (AQX, 2025)

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