

The Columbus Dispatch

'I want my nostalgia'

A Dublin businessman hopes a breakfast cereal popular a half-century ago finds new favor with today's parents and kids

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Stories by [Mark Niquette](#)
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Remember Marky Maypo, the cartoon kid in the old television commercials who screamed, "I want my Maypo"?

Bill Stadlander hopes you do.

The Dublin businessman wants to acquaint consumers with the Maypo they knew as kids in the 1950s and '60s and introduce a new generation to the hot cereal.

Stadlander, a former Ross Products executive, started a company in October 2001 to buy the Maypo, Wheatena and Maltex cereals and G. Washington's Seasoning and Broth mix from ConAgra.

He's bringing back the popular "I want my Maypo" campaign that began in 1956 and believes his small startup company can manage the brands better than large corporations have.

"I wanted brands that have some equity, and Marky Maypo is like the Jolly Green Giant and Mr. Peanut," Stadlander said.

Maypo, one of the original flavored oatmeals -- it has a maple taste -- was developed in 1953. The Maypo and Wheatena brands were sold several times, most recently to ConAgra in 2000.

But the products represented only a sliver of the large companies' business and didn't get much attention. The last Maypo TV ad aired in 1989.

Enter Stadlander, 57, a New Jersey native who came to Columbus in 1979 to work for Abbott Labs' Ross Products division. He wanted to run his own company and was looking for the right opportunity.



Marky Maypo, revived for a new generation



TOM DODGE | DISPATCH

Bill Stadlander, president and chief executive of Homestat Farm, has high hopes for Maypo and the other products he and his company bought from ConAgra in 2001.



A Ross consultant told him ConAgra was selling the cereal and seasonings, and after seven months of negotiations in 2001, he paid \$3.6 million for the brands and the Highspire, Pa., plant that makes the cereals.

Stadtländer created a new company, Homestat Farm, and started building a staff from scratch.

He knew food marketing and distribution from his previous jobs, but he knew little about setting up a business.

At one point, Stadtländer recalls sitting behind a card table on a folding chair in an empty Dublin office, trying to recruit employees.

"I always think I can work my way out of things, bite by bite," he said.

So far, Homestat Farm has kept all of ConAgra's customers for the products and stabilized sales at \$4.3 million last year, Stadtländer said. Under ConAgra, sales fell 12.7 percent in 2001.

About 60 percent of the products are sold at Kroger, Big Bear, Giant Eagle and other retail outlets -- primarily in the Northeast and Midwest, where winters are cold. The balance is sold to nursing homes, hospitals and other institutional customers.

Stadtländer's strategy to revive a brand with strong name recognition isn't new.

Two entrepreneurs bought Oxydol detergent from Procter & Gamble in 2000, for example, and two Borden executives started Aurora Foods in Columbus in 1996 to buy Mrs. Butterworth's syrup, Aunt Jemima waffles and other products.

Also, retailers such as Target Corp. are using advertising with a nostalgic 1950s feel to sell their wares, said Robert Leone, a marketing professor at Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

"Marketers who can build on memories and help individuals recall events associated with a brand or product can have great success," he said.

But Leone said it can be tricky business, trying to tap into nostalgia while also making products relevant to new consumers.

Aurora Foods, for example, has experienced a sales slump and consolidated its operations in St. Louis in 2000.

Stadtländer and his team believe they have a winning formula. Besides banking on the Maypo and Wheatena image, they said the cereals will appeal to health-conscious consumers.

HOMESTAT FARM

The television commercial below was the first for Maypo hot cereal and initially aired in 1956. It featured Marky Maypo, who didn't want the cereal until his father started eating it. Then Marky screamed, "I want my Maypo!" The ad on top, believed to be one of the most-recent for the product, aired in 1989. It featured an actor who played Marky as a child in a previous commercial.



CLASSIC ANIMATION COMMERCIALS FROM THE 50S AND 60S

With five employees in the Dublin office and 13 at the eastern Pennsylvania manufacturing plant, Stadtlander's goal is to boost sales by 15 percent this year. He hopes to reach between \$50 million and \$100 million in sales with acquisitions and new products.

Stadtlander said although his company can't compete directly with Quaker Oats and other companies in the \$850 million hot-cereal business, he can try to stand out among the smaller players.

That's where Marky Maypo comes in. Stadtlander recently launched a new Marky "I want my Maypo" radio ad as a test in the Buffalo, N.Y., market, where the products have strong distribution.

He hopes to expand advertising and improve distribution in other East Coast and Midwest markets, including central Ohio.

Stadtlander's approach is sound, but it's uncertain whether he can devote the marketing resources necessary to revive the brand, said Sonia Reyes, food industry reporter for BrandWeek magazine.

"Brand equity alone is not going to ring up the profits," Reyes said. "By and large, these brands have been neglected. Marky has been a neglected child."

Still, the "I want my Maypo" slogan is a cultural icon and the early Maypo commercials have been recognized as among the best in television history, said Bill Crawford, co-author of *Cerealizing America: The Unsweetened Story of American Breakfast Cereal*.

The Maypo slogan almost certainly was the inspiration for the "I want my MTV" slogan and still has value, he said, comparing Marky with today's SpongeBob SquarePants.

"I think it's a brilliant move," Crawford said of Stadtlander's efforts.

"People are very brand-loyal to breakfast cereals, and I would give him better than a 50-percent shot at being successful."

To capitalize on Marky and broaden Maypo's appeal in the hot-cereal aisle, Stadtlander has redesigned packaging to emphasize the character -- wearing his familiar cowboy hat and kerchief.

He also is considering a bobblehead version and dreams of the day a Marky Maypo balloon appears in the Macy's Thanksgiving parade.

For now, Homestat Farm is making money and meeting goals, Stadtlander said.

And yes, Stadtlander wanted Maypo as a kid.

"I used to put bananas on mine," he said.