

# Supermarkets, television cooking shows, and integrated advertising: New approaches to strategic marketing and consumer engagement

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## 17.1 Introduction

As supermarkets across the West have been the subject of mounting concern about their market control, impacts on the food system, and the ethics and healthfulness of their foods, they have increasingly sought to adopt approaches to strategic marketing and consumer engagement that counter media and public criticism of supermarkets and supermarket practices. The rise of popular food media—television cooking shows, in particular—has offered supermarket retailers a range of new communications and marketing resources with which to present consumers with more positive messages about supermarket food. Central to this have been the opportunities food television offers for supermarket sponsorship and “integrated” (Spurgeon, 2013) advertising, as part of which advertising messages are seamlessly integrated into television program content. This has provided supermarkets with more subtle and sophisticated methods for countering criticisms than more traditional media strategies; however, the fact that supermarkets’ messages are not always clearly demarcated as paid promotional content places additional demands on consumers, who now need to develop increasingly sophisticated media literacies as part of their engagement with food media texts and supermarket brand messages.

This chapter considers these issues in relation to Australian food media and retail industries. With one of the world’s most concentrated food retail sectors, criticisms of supermarkets have been especially intense, and new brand management strategies particularly urgent, in the Australian context. The chapter will look at three television cooking shows that are sponsored by Australia’s two major supermarkets: *MasterChef Australia* and *My Kitchen Rules (MKR)*, which are both sponsored by Coles; and *Recipe to Riches*, which is sponsored by Woolworths. It will show how integrated advertising has been used as a strategy to counter a range of criticisms directed at supermarkets and their practices—from their treatment of farmers to the

ascendency of supermarket “own brands” (Burch & Lawrence, 2007)—by associating major supermarkets with the “culinary cultural capital” (de Solier, 2005) of the television programs and the artisan practices of ordinary home cooks. With many of these strategies an attempt to align with (some may say “appropriate”) the discourses through which media and consumers have attempted to critique, and offer an alternative to, supermarket food, integrated advertising has implications for how consumers now engage with food media and food retailers, as well as for how the meanings associated with supermarket food are being progressively reconstructed and redefined in line with media and food industry interests.

## 17.2 Supermarkets under attack

Before considering the television case studies in more detail, it is important to first locate supermarket strategies of integrated advertising within the context of an intensified media focus on food. That is, supermarkets now operate in a time in which there is both a proliferation of food media texts that reflect (and help produce) growing consumer interest in the pleasures of food and cooking, and increasing media and consumer concern about food risk. In the case of the latter, there are now large media and food industries devoted to critiquing the negative health, environmental, animal welfare, and broader food systems impacts of industrialized foodways—of which the supermarket frequently serves as the public “face.” In popular international media accounts, supermarkets are the key beneficiaries of anonymous, standardized, globalized, and unsustainable food systems. They are “non-places” (Augé, 1995) governed by an ethic of “permanent global summertime” in which fresh produce is available all year regardless of seasonality (Blythmann, 2007, p. 76), and filled with “foodish products” and “edible food-like substances” containing ingredients that “your ancestors simply wouldn’t recognize as food” (Pollan, 2008, pp. 1, 149).

Such critiques have generated a range of popular texts—television cooking shows, cookbooks, and online and mobile media—that seek to reengage consumers with the pleasures of food and “re-enchant” (Lewis, 2008, p. 232; see also Versteegen, 2010) their experiences of the food system. From *River Cottage to Gourmet Farmer*, these texts frequently do this by adopting the language of alternative food networks (see Goodman, Dupuis, & Goodman, 2012) and an increasingly coherent set of representations as to what constitutes “good” food. “Good” food is frequently small-scale, local, seasonal, and unprocessed—it is “real” food that stands in stark contrast to the apparently “unreal” food of the supermarket.

While these critiques of supermarkets and supermarket food are likely recognizable to readers across the Anglophone West (and possibly beyond), they have been felt especially intensely in Australia. Australia’s unusually concentrated food retail sector means that just two supermarkets, Coles and Woolworths, control around 70% of the grocery retail market (Roy Morgan Research, 2016). This substantial market power has been a cause for concern. Both Coles and Woolworths have been

subject to increased regulatory oversight (including Senate Inquiries), as well as investigations by the consumer watchdog Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. They have also experienced ongoing media and public criticism. For example, when Coles and Woolworths slashed the price of their own-brand milk to a considerably discounted AU\$1/litre in 2011, this generated significant media backlash against both retailers, and galvanized public support for farmers hurt by supermarket discounting. In 2014–2015, a series of exposés by journalist Malcolm Knox revealed how supermarkets' asymmetrical contracts with growers and suppliers, along with their duopolistic control of the retail market, has worked to systemically disempower farmers and food manufacturers across a range of food industry sectors.

As they have for supermarkets elsewhere in the world, these kinds of criticisms have posed a brand management problem for both Coles and Woolworths. They have necessitated the adoption of a range of strategies to reengage consumer trust in supermarkets and supermarket food. Drawing on Lindgreen's (2003) work on trust as a "strategic variable" for the food industry, Richards, Lawrence, and Burch (2011, p. 29) call this process the "strategic manufacturing of consumer trust," and point to a range of strategies supermarkets typically adopt to do this, including reputational enhancement and direct quality claims through private standards certification, and practices of discursive claims-making that invoke notions of "authenticity" and "tradition." But in addition to these other strategies, supermarkets have also sought to forge closer relationships with the food media industry and with popular food television productions in particular.

## 17.3 Food media and integrated advertising

In addition to an unusually concentrated food retail sector, Australia has a thriving food media industry. This reflects a global rise of food and lifestyle media in the 1990s, which has typically been understood as a response to the growing centrality of "life politics" in contemporary cultural life and as a reflection of the increasing global influence of neoliberal, consumer-oriented modes of citizenship, in which consumption and lifestyle "choices" are posed as methods for investing in ethical, social, and civic concerns and for constructing ourselves as "good," self-governing subjects (Lewis, 2012; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). The rise of food and lifestyle media is also a response to structural changes in the global media industry. Deregulation of media markets, fragmentation of audiences, declining advertising revenues, and increased competition from online and user-generated media have each posed challenges for "traditional" media industries and necessitated the development of new media products, formats, and strategies.

Food television has been especially successful at navigating this climate of media industry change. It has proven to be particularly adaptable to the logic of formatting, which has enabled the production of predictably successful, low-cost programs that can be sold to global markets and/or customized for local contexts

(see [Oren, 2013](#)). By featuring “ordinary” people (amateur home cooks, in particular), food television has stimulated new forms of audience engagement, including what one report called the “social sofa,” where audience participation in online and social media is now a key dimension of their television experience ([Ashton & Houston, 2011](#)).

While television cooking shows are now a staple of broadcast, cable, online and streaming television services across the Anglophone West, they have proven especially popular in Australia. For example, *MasterChef* was only moderately successful in its original UK incarnation, but became a ratings hit when adapted and remade for Australian audiences. The 2010 series 2 finale of *MasterChef Australia* broke ratings records, making it the most watched nonsporting event since OzTAM television ratings began in 2001 ([ABC News, 2010](#)). It has also been credited with having a so-called “*MasterChef* effect” on the eating, shopping, and cooking habits of Australians: supermarket sales of ingredients surge by as much as 480% after appearing on the show ([Sinclair, 2010](#)). Similarly, *MKR*, a format that originated in Australia, has been so successful in its home country that it is now a global sensation franchised around the world. Both programs have proven highly lucrative for the television production companies involved. While the details of sponsorship deals are closely guarded secrets, *MasterChef Australia* and *MKR* have each been estimated to generate between \$15 and \$20 million in sponsorship revenue per series from their suite of sponsors ([Mitchell, 2014](#)); this is a significant amount of money by Australian television industry standards.

As these figures suggest, food television’s success has made it attractive to both media and other industries. Its focus on food has made it especially appealing to the food industry, and particularly to the supermarkets that are the major sponsors of all of Australia’s primetime competition cooking formats. Coles has been the major sponsor of both *MasterChef Australia* and *MKR* for each of the programs’ ten and nine seasons, respectively. Woolworths has been the major sponsor of *Recipe to Riches*. While *MasterChef Australia* and *MKR* are more conventional programs in which amateur cooks are progressively eliminated in weekly cooking challenges, *Recipe to Riches* is a slightly more unusual program adapted from the Canadian format of the same name. *Recipe to Riches* brings together amateur home cooks who have an idea for a product they hope to commercialize, and a new group of contestants competes each week to have their product selected to be sold in Woolworths supermarkets the following day. *Recipe to Riches* performs much more poorly in the ratings than either *MasterChef Australia* or *MKR* (around 600,000 viewers an episode compared to *MKR*’s 1.9 million, for example), but its success with key advertiser demographics has been enough to sustain two series of the program ([Bodey, 2013](#); [Jackson, 2013](#)), with applications open for contestants for a third series at the time of writing.

These two different types of programs (*MasterChef Australia* and *MKR*, on the one hand, *Recipe to Riches*, on the other) reflect two different models of sponsorship. In the case of *MasterChef Australia* and *MKR*, Coles offers a “top tier” sponsorship contribution estimated to be between \$3 and \$5 million ([Canning, 2010](#); [Lee, 2010](#)) in exchange for a range of brand placement and embedded marketing

opportunities, which sit alongside those offered to range of other sponsors—from Holden cars to Finish dishwasher detergents. With programs beaming into Australian homes up to five or six nights per week, combined with significant online and social media presences, these sponsorship deals provide numerous opportunities for brand messages, and have been credited with helping Coles to “close the gap” with long-term market leader Woolworths (Janda, 2010). Woolworths’ relationship with *Recipe to Riches* is more like the relationships negotiated between record labels and reality TV singing contests, such as *Idol*: in this case, a Woolworths representative sits on the show’s judging panel, and the supermarket chain offers a production contract on the Woolworths’ Select private label to the show’s winners.

Supermarket sponsorship of television cooking shows is not particularly new—for example, product placement has long been a staple of daytime instructional cooking formats (de Solier, 2005)—but the mainstream “reach” of primetime sponsorship deals is substantial, and brand messages are presented in increasingly sophisticated forms. As well as traditional forms of advertising and product placement, they also use the techniques of integrated advertising to integrate brands in storylines, as well as offering branded tie-ins and other kinds of branded program content (Spurgeon, 2013).

Only industry insiders operating under the secrecy of commercial-in-confidence know exactly what is negotiated as part of these deals—for example, we do not know how much of what we see in a food television program is explicitly requested by, or offered to, sponsors and how much is the result of serendipitous alignments between the conventions of food television and sponsors’ core brand messages. But through analysis of the television texts, we can deduce something of their effects as brand management tools, as well as some of their implications for consumers.

## 17.4 Strategic marketing and integrating brands

As the discussion so far indicates, food television has risen to popularity during a period of structural change for the media industries (which has necessitated the development of new sources of revenue and new forms of audience engagement) and at a time of mounting media and public scrutiny of, and concern about, the activities of major supermarkets. The confluence of these two factors has made integrated advertising and sponsorship of television cooking shows attractive to supermarkets not just as a lucrative marketing opportunity, but as a vehicle through which to strategically reengage consumer trust in supermarkets and supermarket food. The effectiveness of integrated advertising and sponsorship lies in its capacity to exploit multiple points of contact between brands and consumers (see Jenkins, 2006). In the context of television cooking shows, successful examples of supermarket integrated advertising and sponsorship are those that tend to draw upon the connotations already associated with the television program, and connect them to those of the supermarket brand. In what follows, I will offer three

examples of branded content and the integration of brands in storylines across *MasterChef Australia*, *MKR*, and *Recipe to Riches* to highlight the different ways that supermarkets are using integrated advertising as a resource for offering alternative (and more positive) media messages about supermarkets as means of combatting ongoing criticism. Each of these examples reflects attempts to respond to key brand management issues facing supermarkets today: the nature of “supermarket food”; supermarkets’ treatment of farmers; and their treatment of suppliers.

### 17.4.1 *Cooking like a MasterChef*

Of the three programs, *MasterChef Australia* was the first to embrace the full potential of integrated advertising. Although the show features branded tie-ins across its suite of sponsors, its central focus on food and cooking with fresh produce enables a deeper level of integration for Coles than is possible for many of *MasterChef Australia*’s other sponsors. Coles is the major supplier of ingredients for all of *MasterChef Australia*’s on- and off-site challenges. Off-site challenges are typically preceded by contestants shopping for ingredients at a nearby Coles supermarket. With Coles-branded shopping bags in hand, contestants are shown purchasing unusual or exotic ingredients, such as quail or octopus, that viewers may not normally associate with the supermarket chain, along with abundant fresh fruit and vegetables. Among this bounty of fresh produce, the processed foods and “edible food-like substances” (Pollan, 2008, p. 1) typically associated with the supermarket are nowhere to be seen. What we see instead is an emphasis on whole, fresh foods, prepared from scratch.

These scenes, in combination with the on-site challenges within the *MasterChef* kitchen, work to perform powerful ideological work for Coles. On-site, the *MasterChef* pantry is the first port of call to collect ingredients for a number of the regular weekly challenges. The pantry is a space filled with shelves and baskets piled high with beautiful, pristine-looking produce—all emblazoned with the Coles logo. Although the pantry includes some packaged ingredients (such as sauces, spices, and dairy products), the fresh produce is positioned in the center of the room, drawing the viewers’ eye to the colorful variety of food on offer. Again, there are no “foodish products” (Pollan, 2008, p. 149) here, just real food, and in forms far more exotic than the typical suburban Coles supermarket—from exotic finger limes and tropical fruits to a dazzling array of multicolored potatoes.

These ingredients are the building blocks of the gourmet, high-end meals that are the goal of most contestant challenges, with the judges’ highest praise reserved for those that produce dishes of “restaurant quality.” If viewers are at all unclear that contestants’ success is dependent on the quality of Coles’ fresh produce, they are reminded during the commercial breaks and through a range of other in-store, online, and print advertisements that (in the words of a successful Coles advertising campaign) if they want to “cook like a *MasterChef* cooks, shop where a *MasterChef* shops.” These advertisements were fronted by Curtis Stone, a celebrity chef well-known for his commitments to sustainable and seasonal produce (Lewis & Huber, 2015), and who

periodically appears as a guest chef on *MasterChef Australia*. In these ways, messages about the quality and desirability of Coles' fresh produce are imbued throughout the televisual landscape of the program. The effect of this is to align the meanings associated with the supermarket brand with those associated with *MasterChef Australia's* "restaurant quality" gourmet credentials and the "culinary cultural capital" (de Solier, 2005) these represent. This assists in positively reframing the meanings of supermarket food as no longer a source of concern or critique, but as the food of choice for "foodies" and aspiring (master)chefs.

#### 17.4.2 Farmer's Choice

Integrated advertising offers opportunities not just to reframe the meanings associated with the types of foods supermarkets sell, but to also manage public perceptions of the conditions under which this food is produced. *MKR* shares many of the same integrated advertising approaches as *MasterChef Australia*, especially with respect to the off-site challenges. In the "instant restaurants" rounds, for example, contestants are shown shopping for ingredients at Coles, and *MKR's* producers ensure that Coles-branded products always have their labels prominently facing the cameras. But *MKR* also offers a more subtle integration of brands in storylines. A key example of this is the now-annual event in which contestant cook for the farmers that supply to Coles. These challenges begin with farmers entering the *MKR* kitchen carrying colorful fruit, vegetables, meat, and fish; they then stay on to watch the contestants as they cook and to assist the judges in evaluating the final dishes.

The "farmer's choice" challenges were introduced at a time of especially intense negative media coverage about the major supermarkets' (allegedly poor) treatment of farmers and suppliers. Indeed, the first "Farmer's Choice" episode in 2014 was an activation of Coles' "Helping Australia Grow" campaign, itself an attempt to "neutralize the noise" of farmer and media criticisms in wake of intense supermarket discounting of own-brand milk (see [The Guardian, 2013](#)). In contrast to the angry and anxious farmers that appeared in a lot of the news and current affairs coverage of the issue at the time (see [Phillipov, 2017](#)), *MKR* depicts Coles' farmers as content, hardworking, and highly satisfied with their relationship with the supermarket chain: this is conveyed through their smiling demeanors, effusive praise of the contestants' dishes, and their protectiveness toward their produce (expressed through regular warnings to contestants to not "stuff it up").

For their part, the judges and contestants respond to the farmers with discourses of gratitude and respect. In the contestant interviews that intersperse the actions on-screen, contestants frequently describe it as an "honor" and a "privilege" to have the opportunity to cook for the farmers. Contestant interviews are an important device used by reality television to provide commentary on, and narrative structure to, the on-screen action. While contestants are not "forced" to say anything they do not want to, the fact that the seconds of commentary that appear in television episodes are compiled from hours of interview footage enables the show's producers to select a small number of comments, focused around particular messages, that



otherwise appear as genuine and unsolicited expressions of contestants' views (Phillipov, 2017). These contestant interviews have been shown to be persuasive with *MKR*'s audience, with much of the social media commentary related to these episodes adopting the same discourses of respect and gratitude for farmers—even down to word choices identical to those used by judges and contestants (Phillipov, 2016). With contestants and audiences (wittingly or unwittingly) drawn into apparently unsolicited endorsements of key messages about how much Coles' farmers are valued and supported, the integration of the Coles brand into the storyline of "Farmer's Choice" offers an effective counter-narrative to other media representations of farmers suffering under supermarket power.

### 17.4.3 *Turning recipes into riches*

Perhaps in a reflection of the show's unusual model of sponsorship, Woolworths' relationship with *Recipe to Riches* results in some quite different approaches to integrated advertising than either *MasterChef Australia* or *MKR*. In contrast to these other two programs, where the integration of brands in storylines ensures lots of opportunities to feature Coles supermarkets, its products and brand logos, Woolworths supermarket appears less frequently on *Recipe to Riches* than one might perhaps expect. Sometimes contestants' product launches are held inside or in front of the supermarket, but apart from the short promotion at the end of episodes encouraging viewers to go and buy the winning product from Woolworths, the supermarket itself is often strangely absent.

This is in part a by-product of the conventions of the original Canadian format, but its effect is to present the products that appear on *Recipe to Riches* as the antithesis of "typical" mass produced supermarket food. For example, much of what is prepared during the episodes' "batch up" round bears little resemblance to what is required to produce products on the scale required for a national supermarket chain. In fact, much of the preparation looks like what contestants would normally do in their own home kitchens, batched up perhaps to catering or restaurant quantities, rather than those for mass manufacture. We see, for instance, contestants chopping chillies and dates by hand, individually zesting and juicing lemons, and preparing apple purée in a regular home blender—practices quite far removed from industrial-scale production (Lewis & Phillipov, 2016). At the point in the series where the products are batched up on a genuinely industrial scale, the judges return to the contestants seeking affirmations of the "lengths" that Woolworths went to in order to ensure that the products were identical to their original home-cooked recipes.

*Recipe to Riches* first aired at a time of ongoing media coverage of supermarket bullying of suppliers of branded products. Much of this coverage suggested that both Coles and Woolworths were targeting branded products through practices such as "cliffing" (where suppliers are given an ultimatum to agree to tougher terms or have their products pushed off the shelf) in order to replace them with supermarket own brands (Phillipov, 2017). Although less successful than *MKR* in enlisting contestants and audiences in the replication of core brand messages (see Phillipov, 2017), at the level of the television text at least, *Recipe to Riches* works



to recast supermarket own brands within a much friendlier space of innovation connected to the artisan cooking practices of ordinary home cooks, and in which suppliers (in the form of contestants) are offered support and assistance to bring their products to the supermarket shelves.

## 17.5 Implications for consumers

As the above examples show, supermarket brands are no longer managed simply through traditional media management techniques, but also through more subtle brand messaging. In a climate where there has been considerable media and public criticism of supermarkets and supermarket practices, such approaches are examples of how these media and public concerns are not just difficulties that supermarkets need to overcome—they are also opportunities to discursively reconstruct and redefine supermarket food in new, more positive, ways. In the case of *MasterChef Australia*, strategies of integrated advertising assist in reframing the meanings of supermarket food as strongly linked to freshness, quality, and gourmet cachet. In the case of *MKR*, supermarkets are reimagined as places characterized by the gratitude and respect they show for the (always happy) farmers that produce this food. In the case of *Recipe to Riches*, supermarket own brands are reenvisioned as a space of innovation and community participation rather than as a threat to traditional brand manufacturers.

Such strategies to “strategically manufacture” (Richards et al., 2011) consumer trust and engagement with supermarkets have significant implications for consumers, who are now subject to increasingly sophisticated advertising messages that may not be immediately recognizable as paid promotional content. Viewers of food television programs are now required to be much more critical media consumers than may have been necessary in the past. While decades of media research shows us that audiences have always been active in their engagement with media texts, there is also some evidence to suggest that, in some cases at least, the blurred lines between advertising and program content on television cooking shows creates the potential that some brand messages will be uncritically accepted (and, indeed, perhaps not even recognized as the advertising that it actually is). The media literacies now required of food television audiences include understanding not just of the broader media landscape in which debates about supermarkets are played out, they also demand better understanding of the industry contexts in which food television is produced, and how these contexts work to create particular types of media text. For instance, it is increasingly necessary for viewers to maintain an awareness of what aspects of their shows might be shaped by the international formats from which local programs are derived, which aspects are determined by the program’s producers with ideas of audience engagement and “good television” in mind, and which aspects are the results of deals with major sponsors. By remaining attentive to these competing forces, it becomes possible to enjoy pleasurable and entertaining experiences of television cooking shows while at the same time keeping an eye toward the other messages for which such shows also seek to enlist our support.

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