

Gambling on Garfield:  
The Creation of Alpo Cat Food and Its Brand Identity

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Companies often use characters, both real and cartoon, to help make their products stand out from a sea of their competitors on crowded store shelves.<sup>1</sup> These characters are more than simple package decorations. The most successful characters become synonymous with the products that they represent. A recognizable brand ambassador can mean the difference between a product's success and its failure. As Thomas Hine explains in *The Total Package: The Secret History and Hidden Meaning of Boxes, Bottles, Cans, and Other Persuasive Containers*, successful packages exude an attractive "personality."<sup>2</sup> This personality helps consumers deem which products are trustworthy and, ultimately, which items to purchase. When Alpo Petfoods Inc. decided to create a line of cat foods, company executives realized that they needed an iconic image with personality to attract customers. They found their brand ambassador in the anthropomorphic Garfield the Cat. Alpo's efforts to develop a cat food line highlight the challenges of successfully creating a strong brand identity in a heavily competitive market. By utilizing the image of Garfield and harnessing his personality in innovative ways, Alpo established itself as a fierce challenger and rival of well-known brands, especially market-leading 9-Lives.

Ultimately, the story of Alpo cat food is one of product failure. Products, like people, have a lifespan. The product life cycle is a marketing term used to describe the development, growth, and decline of a product. Many products make it through the entire lifespan while others die at earlier stages. Failed products can be scrapped before production, pulled from shelves due to a lack of consumer demand, or discontinued for safety or health reasons. Alpo cat food,

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<sup>1</sup> This article was written as part of a larger collaborative project between graduate students in a material culture research course on product packaging at the University of Delaware and the Hagley Museum and Library. The research was turned into an online exhibit, *The History of Product Packaging*, which can be accessed at <http://www.hagley.org/library/exhibits/packaging/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hine, *The Total Package: The Secret History and Hidden Meaning of Boxes, Bottles, Cans, and Other Persuasive Containers* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 89-90, 234-235.

however, is unique because it was dissolved despite being a profitable endeavor. The cat food line had a tumultuous creation as conflicts between the packaging designer and Alpo threatened the products' release. Those issues were ultimately resolved, and the cat food was catapulted to success in large part due to the popularity of their brand ambassador, Garfield. Yet, this was not enough to save the products which eventually fell victim to a corporate merger.

The rise and fall of Alpo cat food can be best understood within the context of two distinct historiographies: the history of the pet industry and the history of twentieth century consumerism. Historian Katherine C. Grier's works on pets explain how companies began the commercial production of pet food at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Many early pet food producers were offshoots of the meat-packing business. Pet foods, especially dog foods, provided an outlet for meat-packers to profit from the meat by-products and cuts not considered acceptable for human consumption. As the industry evolved, the producers of pet foods became increasingly diversified. Later companies were more concerned with producing quality food and conducted nutritional research. Alpo's success was made possible by the increasing demand for pet food after World War II. More pet owners began to rely exclusively on manufactured foods to feed their pets. In response, companies touted their pet foods' taste and nutritional value, two features highly desired by pet owners who saw their animals as family and had income to spend on their non-human companions. By 1989, when Alpo introduced its cat food, the pet food industry was worth \$7 billion.<sup>4</sup>

While many historians have discussed the mass marketing of products in the early and mid-twentieth century, the latter part of the century has been largely ignored. Susan Strasser's

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on the early pet food industry, see Katherine C. Grier, *Pets in America, A History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) and Katherine C. Grier, "Provisioning Man's Best Friend: The Early Years of the American Pet Food Industry, 1870-1942" in *Food Chains: From Farmyard to Shopping Cart*, ed. Warren Belasco and Roger Horowitz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Dan Shope, "This Time, Alpo Bets the Ranch on Cats," *The Morning Call*, November 27, 1989, pg. B.07.

*Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* and Richard S. Tedlow's *New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America* are representative of works that have traced the early twentieth century development of the American mass market, the outcomes and forces of which formed the market conditions later in the century. Scholars of business, economics, and marketing have studied recent product development, brand identity, and the use of brand ambassadors but typically not in the historical context.<sup>5</sup> This examination of Alpo cat food merges the historical and marketing understandings of brand identity to historicize the changing nature of the pet food industry and the use of brand ambassadors.

### **Alpo Enters the Cat Food Market**

The Alpo Corporation was founded in Allentown, Pennsylvania in 1936 when news reporter Robert Hunsicker began mixing dog food in his bathtub. The company was incorporated in 1953 as Allen Products Co., Inc and continued to expand. In 1974, Liggett and Myers Tobacco Company purchased Allen Products. Grand Metropolitan, LLC gained control of Alpo six years later when it purchased Liggett and Myers in 1980.<sup>6</sup> Until the launch of its cat food line in 1989, the Alpo brand was synonymous with its successful dog food products. However, by the late 1980s, Alpo had fallen victim to declining dog food sales. Meanwhile, cat food sales grew, catching the attention of pet food industry leaders.<sup>7</sup> Cat food sales were projected to eventually outpace dog food sales.

Alpo's struggles were partially due to the company's changing relationship with its competitors. Until the 1980s, companies in the highly competitive pet food industry typically

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<sup>5</sup> For example, see Stephen Brown, "Where the Wild Brands Are: Some Thoughts on Anthropomorphic Marketing," *Marketing Review* 10, no.3 (2010): 209-224.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Shope, "Grand Met Puts Alpo on Block," *The Morning Call*, February 9, 1990, pg. B10.

<sup>7</sup> Continuing trends that started in the early 1980s, in 1986 and 1987 dog food sales grew only 1.3 and 2.4 percent, respectively. Cat food sales grew 1.8 percent in 1987 and 3.8 percent in 1988. Shope, "This Time, Alpo Bets the Ranch on Cats."

each had one type of product in which they led the market. For example, Alpo led in sales of canned dog food and Ralston Purina led in sales of dry dog food. According to the theory of multimarket competition, when companies occupy the same market and have similar products, each must consider the risks of corporate retaliation when they choose to compete with another company.<sup>8</sup> The pet food industry was an example of multimarket balance, with the companies observing “mutual forbearance” as long as each was profiting in certain market segments. However, the balance was disrupted in the mid-1980s due to a corporate merger.<sup>9</sup> These actions unsettled the entire pet food market and other companies also began diversifying their products in an attempt to keep pace with their competitors.<sup>10</sup>

The downturn in Alpo’s dog food sales was also the result of shifting pet demographics in American homes. For the first time, more pet owners shared their homes with cats than dogs. Between 1981 and 1986, the American dog population grew 7 percent to 51.6 million, but the cat population grew 38 percent to 56.2 million.<sup>11</sup> The radical changes in pet ownership were largely due to the increase of single adults and households with multiple working adults. Cats were an easier option for people who worked long hours and had limited outdoor space. This growing community of prosperous cat owners wielded significant influence over the pet food market as they proved willing to spend increasing amounts to maintain the health and happiness of their feline companions.

Alpo had tried unsuccessfully to enter the cat food market years earlier. The company first introduced a cat food in 1968, but as Franklin Krum, Alpo’s President and Chief Executive

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<sup>8</sup> Satish Jayachandran, Javier Gimeno, P. Rajan Varadarajan, “The Theory of Multimarket Competition: A Synthesis and Implications for Marketing Strategy,” *Journal of Marketing* 63, no. 3 (1999): 60.

<sup>9</sup> The Quaker Oats company’s new corporate acquisitions challenged Ralston Purina’s stake in the dry dog food market. Ralston Purina then retaliated by releasing products in the semi-moist dog food market that Quaker led.

<sup>10</sup> Jayachandran, “Theory of Multimarket Competition,” 60-61.

<sup>11</sup> Neill A. Borowski, “Here, Kitty! ALPO Chases Cats For Bigger Bite of Pet-Food Market,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 17, 1987, pg. D1.

Officer, explained, “The product deserved to die and it did. It was only one line, and it wasn’t supported well.”<sup>12</sup> In 1983, Alpo purchased two small regional brands as a means to learn about the cat food market so they would not repeat the failure they faced in 1968. Alpo’s prior cat food failure and the years that it invested in market research made the success of their new cat food line even more important. Their cat food line needed to be competitive in a market saturated with well-established brands.<sup>13</sup>

Alpo executives were concerned that unless they did something to raise profits, the company’s future would be bleak. Therefore, the cat food line was not seen merely as new products but as a way to makeover Alpo’s brand identity in order to preserve the company. CEO Franklin Krum maintained a positive façade in interviews with the press, but his uncertainty about the introduction of the cat food products was evident. In an interview with Allentown, Pennsylvania’s newspaper *The Morning Call*, Krum stated, “It’s called betting the ranch. And we’re going to win.”<sup>14</sup> Despite the confident qualifier in Krum’s statement, the phrase “betting the ranch” shows that Alpo executives saw the cat food line as an all-or-nothing endeavor that would either restore the company to its prior success or would contribute to its downfall.

The stakes associated with the cat food line became even higher when Alpo executives spent nearly unprecedented amounts to develop and launch the brand. Alpo spent \$1 million creating the products and testing their taste and nutritional values. The company also spent \$9

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<sup>12</sup> Dan Shope, “Alpo Unveils New Line of Cat Food: Will Garfield Give Up Lasagna?,” *The Morning Call*, November 21, 1989, pg. B07.

<sup>13</sup> Many other companies had already capitalized on these trends and found success in the cat food market. According to market reports from 1985, 9-Lives was the top canned cat food seller with their products accounting for 25.9% of sales. Kal Kan (22.5%), Friskies Buffet (16.9%), and Purina 100 (8.6%) were other canned food sales leaders. Other manufacturers led the dry cat food market. Cat Chow’s products accounted for 22.2% of sales with Meow Mix (13.5%), Friskies (12.3%), Crave (7.7%), and 9-Lives (6.9%) also constituting a large share of the market. Market research data sent from Ralph P. Day to Irv Koons, February 24, 1986, Series 1, Subseries A, Box 1, Alpo Correspondence October 1985-May 1987, “Irv Koons Collection,” Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

<sup>14</sup> Shope, “This Time, Alpo Bets the Ranch on Cats.”

million to revamp its factory in Crete, Nebraska to meet the projected demand for canned cat food.<sup>15</sup> Alpo's post-production expenses were even higher. Of the company's \$70 million marketing budget, \$20 million was spent on advertising and the remaining \$50 million was spent on "promotion, including free standing inserts offering free cans and packages, trade promotions and contacts with veterinarians."<sup>16</sup>

Part of Alpo's significant financial investment was spent on the design of the cat food packages. Package appearance was crucial to the line's success. Since Alpo was a new addition to the cat food shelves in supermarkets, it had to stand out from the numerous well-known and better established cat food brands already available. Alpo chose to hire the design firm Irv Koons Associates to create a recognizable and appealing brand appearance for the line. Designer Irv Koons had studied illustration at the Pratt Institute in New York and after a stint in the military during World War II, he founded Irv Koons Associates. Koons' design firm became successful and created packages for high-profile clients, including American Can and Scott Paper.<sup>17</sup> The collaboration between Alpo and Irv Koons began in late 1985. In correspondence and meetings between the two companies, Alpo stressed the importance of the packaging feature that they believed would distinguish them from their competitors: the use of Garfield as the products' spokescat.

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<sup>15</sup> Shope, "This Time, Alpo Bets the Ranch on Cats."

<sup>16</sup> Shope, "Alpo Unveils New Line of Cat Food."

<sup>17</sup> For more on Irv Koons Associates, see Glenn Porter, "Cultural Forces and Commercial Constraints: Designing Packages in the Twentieth Century United States," *Journal of Design History* 12, no. 1 (1999): 25-43 and Staci Steinberger, "Selling the Silent Salesman: Irv Koons and Mid-Twentieth Century Package Design" (MA Thesis, University of Delaware, 2009).

## Garfield as the Anti-Morris

After Alpo invested millions of dollars in the development of its cat food, it needed a gimmick to attract customers. Alpo found the attention-grabbing brand ambassador that they were seeking when they signed a deal to hire Garfield as the spokescat of the line in 1987. Garfield, the anthropomorphic orange cartoon cat created by cartoonist Jim Davis, was a well-known and loved fixture of newspaper funny pages and television specials since his creation in 1978. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, Garfield comics appeared in about 2,000 newspapers daily.<sup>18</sup> The character also was featured in a television show and on a range of merchandise. By licensing the image of Garfield, Alpo established a strong brand identity by linking their new and unknown products to an instantly recognizable figure.

Corporate use of spokescharacters was not a new marketing tactic when Alpo licensed Garfield. By the late 1980s, there was a resurgence of animated characters being used by businesses in advertising and package design. Animated spokescharacters added a sense of familiarity and reliability to a product. Some companies created their own original characters, like StarKist Tuna's Charlie the Tuna or Proctor and Gamble's Mr. Clean. Others licensed the images of well-known characters, like Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, or Garfield. According to marketing and advertising studies, consumer trust in a character is a major component of the formation of attitudes about brands.<sup>19</sup> Companies also recognized that animated characters added levity to the perception of a product. As one columnist remarked in 1989, "At times, life

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<sup>18</sup> Dan Shope, "Alpo Rolls Out New Products; Garfield Will Do More Eating," *The Morning Call*, October 1, 1991, pg. B06.

<sup>19</sup> Judith A Garretson and Ronald Niedrich, "Spokes-Characters: Creating Character Trust and Positive Brand Attitudes," *Journal of Advertising* 33, no. 2 (2004): 25-26.

can be a real pain in the neck. At such moments, fantasy characters allow us to forget life's trials and tribulations for awhile."<sup>20</sup>

In some respects, Garfield was seemingly a strange choice to be used to help promote and sell a brand of cat food. As he is portrayed in Davis' comics, Garfield is a notorious glutton, eating almost anything he can. However, Garfield's diet typically consisted of only human food, not cat food. How does a cartoon most associated with the consumption of copious amounts of lasagna help sell boxes of kibble and cans of mixed-meat pâté? As CEO Krum explained, "Our research found that 99 percent of cat owners know who Garfield is. He has instant recognition, he's a gourmand, he's finicky, he's outspoken, and he just works great."<sup>21</sup> Davis agreed, stating, "This fit Garfield's projection. He's a big fan of food anyway. There's a logical fit here."<sup>22</sup> He further made the connection between Garfield and Alpo, explaining, "Garfield was always critical of his own food, but he always ate (his dog pal) Odie's. And Odie always ate ALPO."<sup>23</sup>

Overall, Krum's and Davis' assumptions about consumer response to Garfield proved correct. In focus group tests of package designs, many of the people surveyed drew positive associations between Garfield and Alpo cat food. One tester responded that he or she would "expect a lot from it because it's Garfield- ruler of the house. If it's good enough for Garfield, it's good enough for our cats." Another tester stated that he or she would be influenced to buy it because "Garfield is a 1<sup>st</sup> class cat." Testers associated the image of Garfield with the quality of the food, as one subject stated "high quality because Garfield is a high quality cat."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> John S. Blythe, "Animated Characters Making Not-So-Surprising Comeback," *Marketing News*, December 4, 1989, pg. 16.

<sup>21</sup> Shope, "Alpo Unveils New Line of Cat Food."

<sup>22</sup> Shope, "Alpo Rolls Out New Products."

<sup>23</sup> Shope, "Alpo Unveils New Line of Cat Food." There is no reference to Odie eating Alpo in the Garfield comic strips. Jim Davis was likely joking about this.

<sup>24</sup> Burke package testing notes, 1987, Series 1, Subseries A, Box 1, Alpo Correspondence October 1985-May 1987, "Irv Koons Collection," Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

The package testing that Alpo conducted, however, did reveal some potential pitfalls of the use of Garfield to promote the new line. Notes from focus group testing reveal the concern that Garfield would be “perceived as [a] personality, Not [a] Cat!!! Almost human.” Other testers felt that the use of a cartoon on the package cheapened the appearance of the brand, likening the cat food to “sugar-coated cereal” boxes. A larger concern was the possibility that the image and popularity of Garfield would detract from the Alpo brand itself. One tester claimed, “If you don’t remember Alpo you will remember Garfield Cat Food.” Another person echoed this concern stating, “Looks like ‘Garfield Cat Food’ by Alpo. Must be Alpo cat food. Alpo [is] Far more important than Garfield.”<sup>25</sup>

The use of Garfield is even more telling when viewed in comparison to the era’s other popular spokescat, 9-Lives’ Morris. While a number of other spokescats promoted various products, like the Persian SH III, better known as the cat in Fancy Feast commercials, none reached the same level of name recognition as Morris the cat.<sup>26</sup> Morris, introduced in 1969, was a real orange cat (actually several cats) who served as brand ambassador for Heinz’s 9-Lives. The original Morris, a former shelter cat, died in 1978, but a successor was chosen to continue the Morris image in advertisements. Morris was a clear example of the marketing power of a beloved and recognizable mascot. In 1986, 9-Lives realized that their dry and semi-moist cat foods were not selling well and attributed it to the fact that Morris’ image was not on those packages. The canned food, which featured Morris prominently, continued to sell well. 9-Lives redesigned their dry and semi-moist packages and sales of the Morris-adorned packages doubled within four months.<sup>27</sup> Morris’ popularity even inspired 9-Lives to release a \$20 million series of

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<sup>25</sup> Burke package testing notes, 1987.

<sup>26</sup> Liz Swain, “Spokescats Lend Their Images to Feline Products,” *Pet Product News* 48, no. 6 (1994): 72.

<sup>27</sup> “Making Morris the Cat do Double Duty,” *New York Times*, June 8, 1986, pg. F15.

advertisement spoofs in which Morris announced his intention to enter the 1988 presidential race with the platform, “9-Lives in every bowl and a satisfied cat in every kitchen.”<sup>28</sup>

There are many similarities between the original Morris and Garfield. Both are pudgy orange cats, although one is real and one is a cartoon, with supposedly refined tastes. 9-Lives billed Morris as the world’s most finicky cat with a discerning palate who would only eat 9-Lives cat food. While Garfield had a taste for human food, like Morris, when eating cat food, there was only one option that he found satisfactory. Morris and Garfield also both had a reputation for being indifferent to people.

However, the similarities between the two felines decreased when 9-Lives began to shift the public image of Morris shortly before the Garfield-endorsed Alpo cat food line was introduced. In May of 1988, 9-Lives announced that the newly revamped Morris would be “less self-centered and grumpy, more sensitive and open. Unlike his previous 80 commercials, Morris may be seen, lovingly, with his owner.”<sup>29</sup> 9-Lives attributed this personality change to the shifting, more sentimental, views that cat owners had of their pets. Yet it can be postulated that 9-Lives’ dramatic change to Morris was somehow related to Alpo’s highly publicized introduction of a very similar character. 9-Lives may have seen Alpo’s use of Garfield as a gimmick that could overshadow Morris and so they made the changes to distinguish their company from this new competitor.

Alpo executives were acutely aware of comparisons that could be made between Garfield and Morris and between Alpo and 9-Lives. In focus group testing, some of the testers mentioned Morris while looking at Alpo cat food cans.<sup>30</sup> From the initial planning phase of its cat food line, Alpo likely considered 9-Lives to be its most important competition. In marketing research sent

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<sup>28</sup> Geraldine Fabrikant, “Morris Broadens Horizons,” *New York Times*, August 18, 1987, pg. D19.

<sup>29</sup> James Hirsch, “Is It Possible? A Sensitive Morris?,” *New York Times*, May 29, 1988, F5.

<sup>30</sup> Burke package testing notes, 1987.

to package designer Irv Koons, Alpo included copies of marketing strategies from all of the leading brands but sent significantly more information about 9-Lives. Alpo provided Koons copies of 9-Lives' commercials and print advertisements. They did not send similar documents for the other companies that made Kal Kan, Friskies, Fancy Feast, or Amore.

### **The Garfield Packages**

The original Alpo cat food package design prototypes, created by Irv Koons Associates in approximately 1986, did not feature Garfield. Likely designed before the deal between Alpo and Jim Davis that officially licensed Garfield, the early packages featured drawings of severe-looking groups of cats. The cats on these package mock-ups were drawn in black and white, with small color details, like blue and pink ribbon bows around their necks. The background colors were shades of brown which offset a bold white Alpo logo. The almost creepy, harsh expressions on the cats' faces do not seem to match the research about the changing views of cat owners. If cat owners truly were seeing their felines as family members, the aloof, cold feline stares would probably not draw consumers to the cat food.

Another non-Garfield design featured a more realistic, less severe cat. The cat had a serious expression, which was less dramatically out of line with cat owners' views of their feline companions. The sitting tabby's light brown, white, and light orange fur matched the brown used in the background of the box and cans. The only other color came from a banner across the bottom of the package that indicated the flavor of the product. Koons and Alpo must have believed that this package had potential because samples of the cans and boxes were produced and photographed for testing.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Package design photographs in Series 1, Sub-series C, Box OV 5 and OV10 and Sub-series D, Boxes 84 and 86, "Irv Koons Collection," Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

The designs for the proposed cat food packages changed drastically after the Garfield deal. While Garfield eventually became the sole figure on the packages, Koons initially experimented with mixing Garfield into the direction of his earlier designs. On a blended package, Koons placed two orange and brown cats to the left and center of the box's frame. On the right, Koons added the image of a smirking Garfield with his paw placed familiarly on the back of the middle cat. The blending of Garfield and the traditional cats suggests that Koons and Alpo may have initially struggled to determine the best way to utilize Garfield. Koons may also have designed the packages to be intentionally humorous by mixing two seemingly opposite images. Perhaps there was reason to believe that consumers would respond positively to the whimsy of these packages.

Koons then created prototypes that used only the image of Garfield. Many of Koons' Garfield designs emphasize the cartoon cat's love of food. One cat food box and can design shows Garfield, eyes closed, holding a knife and fork while a thought bubble with the word "Alpo" floats above his head. Another package features Garfield daydreaming about fish, milk, cheese, eggs, beef, and other foods that made up Alpo's "7 Protein Sources" formula. This version claimed that the flavor was "for Connoisseurs," a nod to Garfield's gourmet tastes. Perhaps one of the most striking of Koons' Garfield designs places a leaping Garfield on an orange background. This is one of the only packages to feature Garfield in any type of motion. Garfield is shown diving, mouth open, towards a bowl of Alpo cat food.<sup>32</sup>

Ultimately, the packages that made it to production and then store shelves showed a simpler image of Garfield. On these cans and boxes, Garfield is shown in a portrait-style. His body is only shown from his chest up to his grinning face, and his front paws rest on a banner

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<sup>32</sup> Package design sketches and photographs in Series 1, Sub-series C, Box OV 5 and OV10, "Irv Koons Collection," Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

that reads “Gourmet Dinner.” The portrait is framed by a blue circle that says “PROTEIN VARIETY-BALANCED NUTRITION-CAT FOOD” and is placed on a burgundy background. This more subdued and simple image of Garfield may have been chosen in response to feedback from the focus group testing. Testers expressed concern that the image of Garfield could be perceived as too silly and would cheapen the brand. By choosing the image of a comically daydreaming or ravenous Garfield, Alpo risked having their brand seen as a joke. The Garfield portrait design allowed Alpo to avoid having Garfield appear too gimmicky while also still capitalizing on the popularity of his image.

### **Garfield as Brand Ambassador**

Once Alpo decided the best way to utilize Garfield on their cat food packages, they needed to use him as a brand ambassador. Alpo used the image of Garfield to educate consumers about their new products through television advertisements. The company hired Weightman Advertising to develop Alpo’s television presence. Weightman developed several commercial storyboards in which Garfield is introduced to and subsequently devours Alpo cat food. The storyboards look like a traditional Garfield comic strip and seem intended to be illustrated. However, when the first Garfield Alpo commercial aired during the Garfield Thanksgiving television special in 1989, it combined live action and illustration.<sup>33</sup> In the commercial, an actor (likely hired because he looked like a real-life Jon Arbuckle, Garfield’s owner) tells an animated Garfield that they need to let cats (and ideally their owners) know about the new Alpo cat food. Garfield is disinterested, stating, “Cat food is for the unimaginative.” He changes his mind when the actor serves him a massive bowl of Alpo, which Garfield gulps

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<sup>33</sup> Shope, “Alpo Unveils New Line of Cat Food.”

down, bowl and all. Elements of the commercial were proposed in the early Weightman storyboards, including the “cat food is for the unimaginative” line.<sup>34</sup>

The technology that Alpo used in this commercial was innovative and attention-grabbing. Alpo was lauded for their use of “Roger Rabbit” technology to blend cartoon characters and live-action actors, a reference to the successful movie *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* which was released in 1988, a year before the Garfield commercial. The commercials attracted critical attention and in 1991, Alpo earned an award from the American Marketing Association for their inventive television advertisements.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to Garfield’s television presence, Alpo sponsored public appearances for Garfield. One such appearance was in 1990 at an Allentown Symphony Orchestra program. Conductor Ron Demkee wanted the orchestra to perform an educational program for children called “Music is My Life” that featured Garfield, but the \$4,500 price tag was prohibitive. Knowing that Garfield was the spokescat of Alpo cat food, Demkee sought Alpo’s sponsorship for the program, and the company consented. In the performance, actors dressed in costumes as Garfield and Odie, the dog from the Garfield comic strips, taught the audience an appreciation for diverse musical styles. While Demkee and the Allentown Symphony Orchestra’s goal was to expose children to music in an entertaining way, Alpo had commercial motives for sponsoring the event. Alpo spokeswoman Judy Kroeger stated, “We don’t put a sign on the characters that says Alpo, but of course we hope people make that link. Children are particularly enchanted with these characters who are (played by) trained actors.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Weightman Advertising designs, Series 1, Subseries A, Box 1, Alpo Correspondence June 1987-October 1988, “Irv Koons Collection,” Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

<sup>35</sup> Dan Shope, “Company News,” *The Morning Call*, June 17, 1991, pg. B08.

<sup>36</sup> Judith Wyatt, “Garfield Plays Down Food for Music in Pops Event,” *The Morning Call*, April 29, 1990, pg. F01.

Alpo's conscious decision to market their cat food products at a children's event is curious. Since children typically do not purchase products like cat food, why would Alpo be concerned with children being "enchanted" with Garfield and making the connection between the character and the cat food? This question seems to have two possible logical answers: the children's parents were the actual target audience for the sponsorship or Alpo believed that children could influence their parents' purchases. The most obvious reasoning is that Alpo wanted to keep their brand visible to adult consumers in as many forums as possible. Like Alpo's initiative to send actors in Garfield costumes to visit sick children in hospitals, the Orchestra event might have been part of a strategy to convince people that Alpo was a trustworthy brand that was committed to community outreach.

The other possibility, that Alpo was actually seeking to influence children, raises even more interesting points. Cartoon characters are typically used to sell products that appeal to children, like the focus group comment that use of Garfield was reminiscent of "sugar-coated cereal" boxes. Maybe Alpo hoped that children who loved Garfield in television specials, comics, and orchestral dance performances would also like the cat food boxes. Those children, who often are brought on shopping trips with their parents, could beg their parents to buy the "Garfield cat food." In this sense, Alpo could also have been using Garfield to condition future generations of cat food purchasers to look for and trust the Alpo brand.

### **Garfield as Parody**

In late 1987 and 1988, shortly before the launch of the cat food line, Alpo and package designer Irv Koons had a disagreement about the printing of the cat food packages. By mid-December of 1987, Alpo informed Koons that the company would no longer use the printing company that Koons worked with to do the mechanical production of the boxes and can labels.

In a series of letters, Alpo explained that the company had “lost confidence” in Irv Koons Associates’ ability to do the project.<sup>37</sup> Alpo claimed that Koons had misled them about the depth of the color burgundy that was possible to print on the packages. The company alleged that Koons had not told them the deep burgundy that he had proposed would not be cost-effective to print on high-speed printing presses. Alpo claimed that this misinformation had left them with an inferior-looking package. The management of Alpo was also aggrieved that Koons had fought them on the number of colors that could be included on the packages. Alpo claimed that they had only sanctioned five colors, but Koons wanted seven or thirteen, which would make the packages cost prohibitive.

Irv Koons vehemently denied all of Alpo’s claims. Instead, Koons argued that by changing the printer of Koons’ designs, Alpo was breaching its contract with his firm. Koons rejected Alpo’s accusations that he had misled them about the burgundy color that could be achieved or that he had been resistant to Alpo’s wishes about color schemes. On February 22, 1988, Koons sent a letter to Franklin Krum, Alpo’s CEO, proposing two possible solutions to their dispute. In the first option, Koons offered to give up his creative rights to the designs if Alpo hired his company for a future comparable project.<sup>38</sup> Koons was likely referencing the interest that he had expressed in an earlier letter in working on an Alpo dog food project.<sup>39</sup> The other solution that Koons offered was for Alpo to pay the lost completion fees (approximately \$20,000) and a percentage of profits lost from the publicity of the line (approximately \$125,000) to Siegel and Gale, the marketing company that Koons used. Additionally, Koons’ lawyers advised that he apply for a copyright for all of the designs that he produced for Alpo.

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<sup>37</sup> Irv Koons to Franklin Krum, December 15, 1987, Series 1, Subseries A, Box 1, Alpo Correspondence June 1987-October 1988, “Irv Koons Collection,” Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

<sup>38</sup> Irv Koons to Franklin Krum, February 22, 1988.

<sup>39</sup> Irv Koons to Franklin Krum, September 29, 1987.

The available correspondence between Koons and Alpo ends in October of 1988 with no resolution of this conflict. While it is uncertain what exactly happened between the two companies, it is likely that Alpo and Koons came to some form of amicable resolution. The cat food packages, with Koons' designs, were ultimately printed and sold, which indicates that Alpo likely met one of Koon's demands. Koons retired in 1988 and subsequently his business, Irv Koons Associates, was disbanded.<sup>40</sup>

In the midst of this frustrating conflict, Koons privately parodied Alpo and its famous spokescat with a fake Alpo cat food package design. The sketch features a disgruntled Garfield, sitting with his arms crossed, with a thought bubble above his head reading, "Yuck! I wouldn't eat this stuff if you paid me." Not only a statement about the quality of the cat food, this can also be interpreted as an ironic riff on the tens of millions of dollars that Alpo had spent licensing and promoting Garfield. The drawing also includes a parody of Alpo's insistence on clearly promoting its seven protein sources by calling them "7 Repulsive Proteins." Koons transformed Alpo's signature packaging phrase "A Feast Fit for Your Feline" into "A Feast to Sicken Your Feline."<sup>41</sup>

### **Conclusion: What Happened to the Brand that Garfield Built?**

Alpo cat food was a great financial success shortly after its release. Before the product launch, CEO Krum confidently estimated that cat food sales would total at least \$110 million in 1990.<sup>42</sup> Within nine months of the release, Krum's estimation was close to being eclipsed as Alpo had already sold more than \$100 million worth of product, making it the most successful

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<sup>40</sup> Steinberger, "Selling the Silent Salesman," 18.

<sup>41</sup> Garfield parody in Series 1, Sub-series C, Box OV 5, "Irv Koons Collection," Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

<sup>42</sup> Shope, "This Time Alpo Bets the Ranch."

pet food launch in ten years.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, the nine percent of the \$2.45 billion dollar cat food industry that Alpo earned helped to make it the most successful American grocery product released in two years.<sup>44</sup>

The success of the initial launch inspired Alpo to invest another \$10 million dollars to expand production in 1991. Its new manufacturing facility in Allentown, Pennsylvania was capable of producing 114 million cans of cat food annually.<sup>45</sup> In addition to new cat food flavors, Alpo developed and released other cat products. In 1992 the company began selling Alpo Dairy Cat, low-lactose milk especially for felines.<sup>46</sup> Alpo also expanded its customer support by adding a hotline where callers could receive information about its products.<sup>47</sup>

Alpo's cat food success did not save it from corporate restructuring in the early 1990s, however. Grand Metropolitan PLC, Alpo's parent company during the cat food launch, wanted to sell it in 1990. The company removed Franklin Krum as Alpo's CEO and replaced him with Robert Hawthorne. This move was attributed to Krum's management of the expenses associated with the development and promotion of the cat food. However, Grand Metropolitan decided to keep Alpo when it saw how profitable the cat food was becoming.<sup>48</sup> Grand Metropolitan eventually sold Alpo to Nestlé in 1994.<sup>49</sup>

The partnership between Alpo and Garfield most likely ended either with the acquisition by Nestlé or shortly after. Nestlé already owned two successful cat food companies, Friskies and Purina, when it purchased Alpo. Ultimately, Alpo cat food was not successful enough to play a significant role in Nestlé's new business plan. While the company continued to produce Alpo

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<sup>43</sup> Dan Shope, "Former Alpo Chief to Head Cat Litter Firm," *The Morning Call*, November 3, 1990, pg. B25.

<sup>44</sup> Dan Shope, "Alpo Adding \$10 Million Line," *The Morning Call*, September 24, 1991, pg. B10.

<sup>45</sup> Shope, "Alpo Adding \$10 Million Line."

<sup>46</sup> "Garfield to Promote Milk for Cats," *The Ottawa Citizen*, July 3, 1992, pg. B05.

<sup>47</sup> Charles A. Jaffe, "Hotline is the Cat's Meow for Alpo," *The Morning Call*, November 15, 1992, pg. D02.

<sup>48</sup> Dan Shope, "New Top Cat Named at Alpo," *The Morning Call*, January 21, 1992, pg. B07.

<sup>49</sup> Judith Valente, "Grand Met Sets Big Charge, Will Sell Alpo Unit to Nestle," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 20, 1994, pg. 3.

cat food, aggressive advertising and promotion of the products ceased. Nestlé conducted an intensive campaign to blend Alpo into its Friskies production. It converted the Alpo factory in Allentown, Pennsylvania into a Friskies factory and downsized operations and laid off employees.<sup>50</sup> At this time, Garfield stopped appearing in Alpo advertisements. It is likely that Nestlé did not believe that it was necessary to pay to continue to use Garfield when it already had other successful cat food products. The company eventually discontinued the Alpo dry and canned cat food lines in 2006 and 2007, respectively.

It is impossible to calculate how much of Alpo's early success can be attributed to Garfield. However, it is clear that Garfield did become the face of the cat food line and an important brand ambassador. Garfield's popularity and likeability provided stability to a new product line entering a rapidly changing pet food market. People trusted the Garfield brand and, in turn, were drawn to the cat food packages that had his face emblazoned upon them. Through successful advertising campaigns, public appearances, and product launches, Alpo cat food became synonymous with "Garfield cat food."

Although the early years of the story of Alpo and Garfield show the importance and cost of establishing a strong brand identity, the later story shows that even a strong brand identity may not be enough to sustain a product. Alas, while Garfield's mischievous mug attracted customers, it was not enough to survive the ruthless reality of an era of corporate mergers and acquisitions in which the sustainability of a brand was tenuous. While Garfield probably had nothing to do with the eventual discontinuation of Alpo cat food, the partnership between Alpo

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<sup>50</sup> Dan Shope, "New Owner Nestle Tries to Make Transition at Alpo Go Smoothly," *The Morning Call*, May 14, 1995, pg. D01.

and Garfield fell short of Jim Davis' prediction that they would continue to work together "into the turn of the century."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Shope, "Alpo Rolls Out New Products."

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