

## RESEARCH ARTICLES

## Instant Noodles as an Antifriction Device: Making the BOP with PPP in PNG

Frederick Errington, Tatsuro Fujikura, and Deborah Gewertz

**ABSTRACT** Focusing primarily, but not exclusively, on urban and periurban Papua New Guinea (PNG), we discuss the significance of instant ramen noodles to those now known as the “bottom of the pyramid” (BOP). Although instant noodles are remarkable in that they are eaten by virtually everyone in the world, albeit in different amounts and for different reasons, they are marketed in PNG specifically as a “popularly positioned product” (PPP) for the BOP. Cheap, convenient, tasty, filling, and shelf stable, they are a modern addition to Sidney Mintz’s classic “proletarian hunger killers” of sugar, tea, and coffee. But, we argue, instant noodles have a distinctive contemporary role: they do more than sustain the poor; they transform them into the aspiring consumers of the BOP. As such, instant noodles can be viewed as an antifriction device, greasing the skids of capitalism as it extends its reach. [*instant noodles, bottom of the pyramid, Papua New Guinea*]

We three anthropologists are collaborating to trace the striking trajectory of instant ramen noodles, an industrial food that, from its invention in Japan in 1958, has rapidly spread throughout the world. Our project, begun in 2008 (although using some data collected earlier), has taken us—singly or together—to the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, Nepal, and Papua New Guinea (PNG), where we have spoken with representatives of food companies, food laboratories, supermarkets, and food-aid programs; where we have visited noodle-focused museums; and where we have surveyed and conversed with instant noodle eaters, rich and poor.

Made from widely available and broadly acceptable ingredients (wheat, vegetable oil, and assorted flavorings readily blended for local preferences), instant noodles have become both ubiquitous and quotidian. For instance, during 2009, some 92 billion packets and cups of this cheap, convenient, tasty, filling, and shelf-stable product were sold across an impressive range of markets (World Instant Noodles Association 2010). So widespread have they become in Thailand that they are used as an economic index. Thus, in 2005, “Mama Noodles,” Thailand’s biggest instant noodle producer, launched the Mama Noodles economic index to reflect the country’s recovery from the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis (Thai Eyes 2010). So popular have they become in rapidly transforming Nepal that “if all the packaged noodles sold in Nepal during the past two decades could join hands,

they might reach the top of Mount Everest. Tons of the stuff [are] filling Nepali bellies” (Shale 2003). (Nepali consumed some 590 million packages of instant noodles during 2009 [World Instant Noodles Association 2010].) So cheap, convenient, tasty, filling, and shelf stable—and so widely familiar—have they become that they figure prominently in worldwide relief feeding. In fact, during 2010, the World Instant Noodles Association donated 550,000 packages to quake-hit China and 10,000 packages to flood-stricken Hungary. And during 2011, Nissin Foods donated one million servings to tsunami-ravaged Japan along with seven “kitchen-cars,” each capable of serving daily about 1,800 cups of noodles, even in places where water and power supplies have been interrupted (Japan Today 2011).

Finally, and of special interest in this article, so promising has the market in instant noodles become that they are central to the Nestlé Corporation’s strategy of selling “popularly positioned products” (PPP) to poor people, those at the “bottom of the pyramid” (BOP). Nestlé, the world’s largest food corporation, first announced this strategy in 2006 for Latin America and extended it by 2008 to Oceania, a region that includes Papua New Guinea (PNG). There, the rapidly spreading consumption of instant noodles caught the attention of Frederick Errington and Deborah Gewertz, whose PNG research (initially in 1968 and 1974 and most recently in 2011) has come to focus on changing foodways, especially in urban and periurban circumstances.

In PNG (and elsewhere), instant noodles have become a modern addition to the classic “proletarian hunger killers” of sugar, tea, and coffee (Mintz 1979). Often consumed daily, these inexpensive hunger killers are quick to prepare, easy to like, and widely popular cross-culturally, though sugar and instant noodles in particular may be important for poor people in cash-dependent urban and periurban circumstances. But more is hoped by the likes of Nestlé from instant noodles than simply keeping the affluent happy and the poor sustained. Bringing instant noodles to PNG (and elsewhere) is part of a global project to transform the poor into the BOP: to transform them into consumers embarked on an auspicious commodity trajectory that will reward them and those who bring them what they increasingly want. As such, we argue, instant noodles serve as an antifriction device.

We refer here to Anna Tsing’s use of the concept of “friction” to refuse “the lie that global power operates like a well-oiled machine” (2005:6). We do agree that capitalist penetration is a complex process of conjuncture, filled with the gear-clashing uncertainties and inefficiencies of pause, drag, and redirection (and of “spasms,” “seeps,” and “spurts,” as characterized by J. K. Gibson-Graham [2006:137]). However, we also think that certain globally flowing, industrially produced commodities grease the skids of capitalism as it extends its market reach. And when a commodity is as intimate as everyday food—food that is inexpensive, widely available, generally acceptable (or readily modified for local tastes), and relatively easy to convey and prepare—the socioeconomic transformations attendant on globally flowing products may happen with little apparent fuss or muss. This is to say, products like instant noodles may work to normalize and validate a world in which commodities, often made by unknown people through unknown processes in unknown places, are marketed for profit as “goods” subject to consumer evaluation and choice. Ubiquitous and quotidian, selectable and delectable, instant noodles may serve as “Consumption 101”—a course shifting the “habitus” (to use Pierre Bourdieu’s well-known term [1977]) of those who acquire and eat them.

In urban and periurban PNG, this shift in habitus has become pervasive, reaching literally from cradle to grave: babies are often weaned with instant noodles, and elders celebrated in death rituals with instant noodles as elements in exchange. Indeed, instant noodles blur the distinction between “strong” and “weak” forms of globalization because they are so readily incorporated into daily life—both with and without local inflection. Easing people worldwide along a path of capitalist acquisition and consumption, they not only produce “similar kinds of subjects on a global scale” but can also be assimilated into local realms “of practiced meaning” (Friedman 1995:78; see also Featherstone et al. 1995; Foster 2008:1–31).<sup>1</sup>

Instant noodles, in their multidimensional palatability and in their blurring of strong and weak forms of globalization, are a remarkable product, caught up in a remarkable global project. As we shall see in further detail, this global

project—to link the consumption of instant noodles to the creation of the BOP—has shifted the parameters of what Lynne Phillips calls “the markers of food inclusion and exclusion” and created “alternative food futures” (2006:46). Perhaps ironically, the likes of Nestlé would congratulate itself for doing just this. By bringing the instant noodle-eating poor into the BOP, it has promulgated a “big-food” future in which everyone—producer and consumer—would benefit: sales would flourish, and prosperity and comfort would become less elusive. That the availability of instant noodles convinces many Papua New Guineans to subscribe, at least provisionally, to this win-win future is the fact about which we write.

### TRANSFORMING THE POOR INTO THE BOTTOM OF THE PYRAMID

There are, of course, other contemporary foods that are widely available, are considered generally acceptable, have a worldwide reach, and appeal (in different ways) to rich and poor. Central among these, as we have implied, are the popular and easily affordable (at least in basic form) proletarian hunger killers—sugar, tea, and coffee—often as they appear in modern, frequently combined, guises.<sup>2</sup> Of special interest, as we focus on the reach of capitalism and the creation of the BOP, is Coca-Cola. As Robert Foster shows (2008), this proprietary concoction of sugar, caffeine, and secret ingredients has been, with vigilant company attention to supply-chain governance and brand management, remarkably successful in reaching into the world’s corners. This is certainly the case in PNG where it has won the “cola wars” by beating out rival brands.

There are intriguing similarities and nuanced differences between the market strategies used by the producers and purveyors of Coca-Cola and of instant noodles in PNG. (Interestingly, according to Martha Macintyre’s anthropological research, the most frequent food-store purchases on PNG’s gold-rich island of Lihir were Coca-Cola and instant noodles [personal communication, February 14, 2011].) What is most significant for our purposes, though, is that the modernist work of each, while overlapping, nonetheless proceeds somewhat differently: Coca-Cola refreshes; instant noodles fill and sustain. As such, it is instant noodles that are becoming inescapably central to the diets of the BOP in PNG.

The term *bottom of the pyramid* has not always referred to a distinctive and promising market segment. It apparently began its life in a 1932 radio address delivered by Franklin Roosevelt in Albany, New York, in which Roosevelt stated:

These unhappy times call for the building of plans that rest upon the forgotten, the unorganized but the indispensable units of economic power . . . to build from the bottom up and not from the top down . . . [and to] put their faith once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid. [Roosevelt 1932]

More recently, this depression-era man has, within postindustrial, consumer capitalism, become part of a huge

aggregate—whose future, it seems, is far from bleak. Although size estimates vary, C. K. Prahalad (late professor at the University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business) sees the BOP as “those 4 billion people who live on less than \$2.00/day” (2006:xvi). Given the size of this market category and its collective purchasing power, many businesses, especially multinational corporations, are following Prahalad’s lead in *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid* (2006). In his book, he famously argues that not only can money be made from but also good can be done for those at the BOP.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a report by the Aspen Institute reasons: “If companies are innovative enough to create or tailor their products to the economic realities of and life needs of these people, a significant profit can be won. At the same time, this group’s entry into the market would hopefully better their quality of life and aid in regional economic development” (Aspen Institute 2007:1). Elaborating these points, Ted London (also of the University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business) states:

Corporate investment at the base of the pyramid could mean lifting billions of people out of poverty and desperation, suggesting that serving these markets will not only generate economic profits (some estimate the BOP to have 14 trillion in collective purchasing power) but also may address the social and environmental challenges associated with a growing gap between rich and poor. [Aspen Institute 2007:4]

This is a neoliberal model that promises evolutionary change through market-based mechanisms: a single course of progress linking commercial success with personal and social development. (In fact, the distinction between personal and social benefit is largely collapsed in this model.) Prahalad’s two subtitles reflect this linkage: “eradicating poverty through profits” and “enabling dignity and choice through markets.” Both depend on a critical “take-off”: the creation of “the capacity to consume” (Prahalad 2006:16).<sup>4</sup> And once “the poor are converted into consumers, they will get more than access to products and services. They acquire the dignity of attention and choices from the private sector that were previously reserved for the middle-class and rich” (Prahalad 2006:20). Moreover, these newly empowered consumers will constitute a burgeoning market for other goods and services. Indeed, in the language of Abraham Maslow, whose ideas often inform discussions of the BOP’s potentialities, once the necessities of survival are met, people will strive for “self-actualization” through their choice of products.<sup>5</sup>

In this marketer’s vision, hence, the hierarchy of needs leads people through a hierarchy of products. Multinational corporations are, therefore, increasingly directing their entrepreneurial lens on the BOP. Forgotten and fragmented no more, the BOP is being constituted by these companies as a socioeconomic category of active market participants. These participants are depicted as eager for products that make their daily lives more secure and comfortable as well as open new horizons—products like cheap cell phones, which can help them bank, negotiate credit, and otherwise

engage in commerce. Such products, it is said, bring them utility, hope, and progress. (For analyses of commerce and communication among the BOP, see Elyachar 2009, Ilahiane and Sherry 2009, Maurer 2009, and Tacchi 2009.)

Yet, many voice concern about this marketing-focused win-win strategy—a strategy, to repeat, that links corporate profit to personal and social benefit. (See, among others, Jenkins 2005, Karnani 2007, Landrum 2007, Thomas 2009, and Warmholz 2007.) Not surprisingly, those seeking corporate profit ponder whether their products might be feasibly linked to this new category of BOP consumers. Because large volumes must compensate for low unit prices, the challenges in selling to the BOP are considerable. The product must have broad appeal—sufficient to extend beyond any given group or locality. The product must be affordable, a condition often met by selling in small sizes or in single units provided that costs incurred by inefficiencies in packaging and distribution are controlled. And the product must deliver satisfaction to value-conscious consumers. Finally, if all of these challenges are overcome, it may be hard to profit in a predictable way from customers who may be only “one setback (disease, injury, monsoon, crime, war) away from disaster” (Thomas 2009).

The extent to which consumers find personal and social benefit is clearly related to their satisfaction with the products they buy, including how well these products sustain them under still-difficult circumstances. However, their satisfaction may also become qualified if they suspect that the benefits accruing to them as consumers are incommensurate with those accruing to producers and purveyors. With this suspicion, the rhetoric of a win-win deal may fail to convince. Apparently, this was the case in India (a case we will return to in our conclusion) when consumers of Hindustan Unilever Limited’s Lifebuoy soap balked at purchasing the product, concluding that the balance between corporate profit and the personal and social benefit of enhanced cleanliness was unfairly tilted against them. Their response was political activism expressed in statements like “Give us drinking water first, instead of [brand name] soap” (as discussed and quoted by Cross and Street 2009).

There are, we think, food products that can overcome these challenges in matching product to consumer. The Nestlé Corporation has determined that its (previously mentioned) worldwide line of PPP has the potential for profit among cash-dependent and concentrated urban and periurban populations. Of this line, Nestlé has been particularly successful in PNG (and elsewhere) with its Maggi brand of instant noodles. Cheap, convenient, tasty, filling, and shelf stable, instant noodles did not take long to ease their way throughout PNG.<sup>6</sup>

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF INSTANT NOODLES

Any history of instant noodles must begin with Japan. When we started our collaboration, Fujikura already knew some of this history as part of a Japanese education. Yet we all learned much when, during September of 2010, Errington

and Gewertz joined Fujikura in Japan.<sup>7</sup> As we were shown by displays at two noodle-focused museums, in conversation with executives at instant noodle giant Nissin Foods, and in numerous publications, instant noodles were created by Momofuku Ando in post-WWII Japan. Building on a well-established (noninstant) noodle tradition, Ando sought to configure a product for the needs of his hard-pressed and often hungry compatriots. The widely circulated account—which is elaborated in Ando’s autobiography, *The Story of the Invention of Instant Ramen* (2002)—concerns tireless experimentation in a backyard hut. From the beginning, Ando wished to create a product for a mass market.

I set myself five objectives. First, the noodles should be tasty and palatable. Second, they should keep for a long period of time and be easy to store in the kitchen. Third, they should be easy to prepare. Fourth, the product should be inexpensive. Fifth, the noodles should be safe and sanitary since they were for human consumption. [2002:49–50]

Like most Japanese noodles, Ando’s were made from wheat, an ingredient both familiar and inexpensive given U.S. food aid at that time. His primary technical challenge was to discover a method of precooking noodles so that they retained their form and were shelf stable yet would be readily reconstituted and tasty. The eventual solution was to apply “the principle of tempura” (Ando 2002:51): to pass the noodles, already steamed and sprinkled with chicken broth, through a bath of hot oil. In this way, as the noodles cooked, moisture bubbled out, leaving them dehydrated and porous, relatively inert, and easily (instantly) rehydrated when immersed in hot water. Ando states that, in first demonstrating instant noodles at Japanese department stores,

customers would not believe me when I announced: “Just pour hot water on the ramen and wait two minutes.” . . . And much to the amazement of the customers it was ready to eat! . . . I do not know who first suggested it, but CHICKEN RAMEN eventually came to be called . . . Magic Ramen. As I observed the customers’ reactions, I became convinced the product would become a hit. [2002:57–58]

And it seems that the noodles were indeed impressive and important. Certainly, this emphatically was the opinion of Professor Akira Adachi, an anthropologist at Kyoto University. During a set of interviews about instant noodles with Japanese professors as well as graduate students (comparable to ones Errington and Gewertz have been collecting among teachers and students in the United States), he stressed that, for many in Japan, instant noodles were part of the “developing process.” Here is a close-to-verbatim excerpt from Gewertz’s notes:

For Japanese in the 1950s, they were a symbol of modernity. When packets of instant ramen first became available, they were amazing. You would put the ramen in a Chinese [ceramic] bowl, just add hot water, cover the bowl with a plate and wait three minutes. You couldn’t even wait that long so you picked it up after two. And there was noodle soup. Wow! We were in a bad way then, but instant noodles made us feel we were technologically progressing. It had everything we were familiar with: MSG, salt, spices. Japan was in a bad situation, and ramen made us feel we

were taking off. There were lots of instant things coming on to the market: instant cameras, for example; instant juice [powdered juice], which you put in water and it bubbles. I felt excitement that Japan was on the way up because it had instant things. [field notes, September 4, 2010]

However, instant noodles had only begun their trajectory. Indeed, Ando was successfully exporting them to the United States even before he knew what their sales in Japan might be. “I said to myself: ‘Food knows no national boundaries.’ I suppose that even then I already had a gut feeling that instant ramen would one day become a global food” (2002:57).

And he was right. This modernist (and “amazing”) food has proven pervasively popular. Of the some 92 billion portions (packets and cups) sold during 2009, 90 million went to residents of “Fiji and Outskirt Islands,” a region that includes PNG with its noodle-eating BOP (World Instant Noodles Association 2010).

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF INSTANT NOODLES IN PNG

During June and briefly in July of 2009 and for a week in March of 2011, Errington and Gewertz lived in Lae, PNG’s second-largest city and headquarters of Nestlé’s Maggi instant noodle operation. There they interviewed past and present factory executives and sales managers as well as supermarket managers and wholesalers who carried Maggi and other brands of noodles. In addition, they interviewed nutritionists and food technologists at Lae’s University of Technology who were familiar with Nestlé’s PNG operation.

Larry Ori was especially knowledgeable about how Nestlé created and extended the networks necessary to introduce this novel and potentially lucrative product. A Papua New Guinean, he had been involved with instant noodles from their beginning in PNG, having recognized a PNG market in the making. Ori told Errington and Gewertz during an interview on June 23, 2009, that, in the early 1980s, Nestlé was selling its products into PNG through big companies, one of which he worked for. This was a broker business, in which goods were ordered from Australia and bundled into shipments to PNG. Then he met a Malaysian Chinese, Erik Gan, who was an export manager for Nestlé. Both agreed that, as cheap and easy as they were to prepare, instant noodles were a natural for modernizing PNG. So they decided to bring two containers of instant noodles from the Nestlé factory in the Philippines to PNG. When Ori took some instant noodles home, his wife wouldn’t have anything to do with them because they didn’t look like proper food. However, his kids liked them right away.

In 1985, Ori continued, a Nestlé instant noodle factory was opened in Fiji (as corroborated by World Investment News 2003). It was the first Pacific Island instant noodle factory, and it exported the product to PNG. Although, as with his kids, there was an immediate interest in instant noodles, he knew that “to instill taste and establish the brand” would require work. For instance, he took them in vans so

as to “reach the masses with seeing, touching, and tasting.” PNG food was rather bland, yet Papua New Guineans were receptive to more intense flavors. When they poured the flavor sachet onto their instant noodles, they loved the aroma and taste.

He and others traveled extensively throughout the “Highlands and Islands,” promoting the product. They went into stores, squatter settlements, markets, cultural shows, church fetes, meetings of women’s groups, and schools. They offered free samples and asked people whether they liked what they were eating. In addition, they used a TV to show videos about cooking instant noodles. Soon they knew they “were on to something very big.” Although some initially balked at the appearance of instant noodles, thinking of them as “little worms,” most came around quickly. The chicken flavor won them over, as did the slogan (in translation from Tok Pisin) “Fast to Cook, Good to Eat.” But “we also piggy-backed on rice.” They placed the TV and the display of instant noodles right above 20-kilogram bags of rice stacked on the floor. When people came to buy rice, “we would offer them a taste of noodles and, if they liked them as they often did, point to where they could buy them. The rest was word of mouth.”

By 1987, Ori explained, sales had picked up sufficiently to justify building a factory in Lae. Permission from the National Investment Authority was granted when Nestlé promised to create jobs. And, indeed, as the factory manager told Errington and Gewertz in 2009, about 190 workers were currently employed there.

Not entirely by coincidence, Errington and Gewertz’s first research into urban and periurban realities in PNG took place during the same year that Nestlé decided to build its PNG factory. They were living in the town of Wewak with Chambri people who were increasingly migrating from their home villages, lured by prospects of urban-based “development.” These Chambri left in search of better educational opportunities and social services as well as modern experiences: they were coming to feel that to spend their whole lives in villages would be to miss out. Urban life could be exciting, and many Chambri enjoyed wandering around town, often in the company of friends, visiting the crowded shops, markets, bus stops, sports fields, and churches. However, for most of them (as well for the migrants from other places), money was short. Thus, according to three months of statistics Errington and Gewertz collected during 1987, only 17 percent of Chambri adults living in a Wewak squatter settlement had regular salaries. Most of the other men and women in the settlement were artisans—carvers or basket weavers—reliant on income earned from sales. Over the three-month statistics-gathering period, many of these artisans made no sales at all. More food deprived in town than they had been in their fish-rich home villages, they eked out a living somehow. They subsisted at least partly on smoked fish occasionally sent from home-village kin, on green mangoes gathered from trees belonging to others, on marsupials killed in the bush, and on what inexpensive food they could

buy with small earnings from street hawking and the like (see Gewertz and Errington 1991).

A similar picture emerged from more recent statistics Errington and Gewertz collected among other Chambri migrants living in a periurban settlement near the town of Madang. During 2006, while working on another food-related project (see Gewertz and Errington 2010), they learned that only 15 percent had regular incomes, with most of these earning minimal amounts (e.g., only \$16.80 per fortnight at a tuna cannery). Like the earlier migrants, many of these urban-dwelling Chambri without salaries were dependent on selling artifacts and baskets or on scrounging within a far-from-thriving informal economy. Of these Chambri, 34 members of six households—households including both wage earners and artisans—were the subject of more focused research, specifically a survey of what family members ate daily. Virtually all bought the cheapest foods available—which, by this time, often included instant noodles.

Also in 2006, Errington and Gewertz sought an indication of what a somewhat more affluent group of Papua New Guineans ate. They requested that a friend survey the “food baskets” of his colleagues at Ramu Agricultural Industries, the site of an earlier project (see Errington and Gewertz 2004). He asked 22 workers (earning between \$41.84 and \$300 per fortnight) what they had purchased with their last pay. For everyone, the basic items were rice, sugar, cooking oil, canned fish, local vegetables from an open-air market, and instant noodles.

Finally, we should mention that all of this information concurs with the appraisal of Paul Savage, Lae manager of a major food wholesale firm. During 2009, he told Errington and Gewertz that “noodles began to take off in 1987” and there “has been a dramatic growth” since then that “shows no sign of letting up” (personal communication, Errington and Gewertz, June 29, 2009).

Ori has remained committed to fostering this growth. One of his recent projects followed from his observation that, in Asian countries, people ate while on the move. This inspired him to create a flourishing “hub” system: a central area where company-approved vendors purchased pre-measured ingredients consisting of dry noodles and chopped fresh vegetables (primarily carrots and spring onions). These they mixed with hot water and eggs in a standardized ratio to brew up big pots of instant noodle soup for sale from carts—“vending boxes”—owned by the company. These carts (largely in the city of Lae where there were some 45 during 2009), each sporting a big Maggi-logoed umbrella and brightly painted in the yellow and red Maggi colors, were situated at high-traffic areas like bus stops and entrances to outdoor markets. There, the vendors—presentable young people (with clean fingernails and not chewing betel nut)—dipped out hygienic, filling, and affordable (\$0.20) cupfuls of noodle soup to those many Papua New Guineans milling around in town who were unable to afford more leisurely or expensive fare (see Figure 1).<sup>8</sup> Ori emphasized that this hub



FIGURE 1. A hub vending box at the Lae market.

system was designed to do more than make sales to mobile consumers—sales that, though profitable, would never be that great in volume. Of equal (if not greater) importance, the hub system promoted the brand more generally. At the same time, it won the favor of the government by stimulating an informal sector.<sup>9</sup> Nestlé's decision to try this system in PNG also followed from its completion of a "four-tier pyramid study" of the worldwide market and the conclusion that more could be made from the "bottom of the pyramid." Ori elaborated:

We tested the recipe for one year. We worked out the format with the prescribed water level so as to ensure health and hygiene and the office in Sydney approved. The concept [then] went all the way to Switzerland [Nestlé's corporate headquarters]. And now it is in Africa and the rest of the world. Fijians have come here to look at us, and the income idea for the poor has appealed to them. If people are on the streets selling ice blocks or cigarettes, they get no more than 20 to 30 bucks [\$7–\$10]; while a pot of Maggi noodles gets them 50 [\$17]. They buy the ingredients, we prescribe what and how much; we know that if they come back in three days, they are doing it right; if they don't come back then and wait more, they have broken it up [diluted it]. There's a blackboard inside the hub with all the vendors' names and every time one comes in for ingredients, a tick is put next to the name. That's how we keep track and control.<sup>10</sup>

Ori's story is of the creation of a network that introduced a novel and efficacious commodity—a commodity that, because it was cheap, convenient, tasty, filling, and shelf stable, compelled attention and created desire throughout PNG, from Highlands to Islands. To be sure, Ori and his associates did have to improvise as they went along. They did encounter pauses, drags, and redirections as they tried to convince Papua New Guineans to "see, touch, and taste" their product and as they sought to "instill the brand." Overall, though, they were able to manage their network and

control their brand with sufficient skill and imagination that acceptance came rather quickly; they were "on to something very big." We might add—and we will elaborate on this later in the article—that data from 189 Papua New Guineans interviewed by our research assistants (in two PNG urban centers and in one village near a commercial center) indicate that no one disliked instant noodles and that only a few were indifferent to them. Indeed, they have become the new and modernist staple. Although calorie-for-calorie instant noodles are about two-thirds more expensive than rice and gram-for-gram about twice as expensive, they are not only reasonably affordable but also, for most and for multiple reasons, distinctively enticing.

Instant noodles have been so well received in PNG that the market has recently become flooded with imports, principally from Indonesia, Vietnam, and China. In fact, long-term control over such a permeating product in such an eagerly receptive market would be difficult. To quote Paul Savage once again: "Now, all major wholesalers—every man and his dog—are importing noodles. . . . Everyone wants a bigger cut of the margin . . . [and some of the big stores] have their own brands; there are brands, brands, and more brands" (personal communication, Errington and Gewertz, June 29, 2009). Yet, if Nestlé's careful creation of the PNG market for instant noodles opened the door for its competitors, Nestlé's Senior Brand Manager in PNG, Wanzefri Wanzahari, did not seem unduly worried because (in 2009) Maggi still had some 80 percent of the market. He told Errington and Gewertz that the competition was to be predicted: "There's always competition. It's a free market. So we just have to step up and maintain our share" (personal communication, Errington and Gewertz, July 2, 2009).

Regardless of which brand got which market share, instant noodle capitalism was thriving in PNG. During 2011, an industry insider estimated that, in a population of some six million, per capita annual consumption was 20.4 packs. For those urban and periurban people dependent on purchased food, the figure would be much higher (as the survey data we describe below indicate). The United Nations estimates that urban growth will increase to 4.3 percent by 2030 (United Nations 2009). Moreover, there seems to be increasing penetration of instant noodles, shelf stable and easily transportable as they are, into areas in which they supplement locally grown food. For example, by 2011 they were available at nearly every market and stand located along the 350 kilometers of road between the cities of Madang and Lae (see Figure 2).

That this thriving and expanding market attracted competitors was not only inevitable under free market conditions but also could be seen as creating an additional market opportunity. After all, competition created market choice, and market choice helped transform the merely poor into members of the BOP: those who, as aspiring consumers, might be interested in instant noodles as well as in a range of products. Under these circumstances, Nestlé, with its resources and product line, might continue to do well.



FIGURE 2. Instant noodles sold at a roadside stand.

### WORKING TOWARD THE BOP IN PNG

Papua New Guineans have long been promised the benefits of social and economic development. The government, both colonial and postcolonial, did invest in roads, school, clinics, and—especially in remote, “backward” areas—large-scale commercial enterprises including oil palm and sugar plantations. However, in 1994, there was an important shift in government policy and practice. Faced with increasing budget deficits, the government sought help from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). In return for help, PNG agreed to make the “structural adjustments” required of indebted countries worldwide. Central to these were “user-pay” policies that substantially replaced government entitlements with individual responsibilities. Despite the unpopularity of these “adjustments,” development was still presented as achievable. However, it would have to be market based, with consumers increasingly accountable for obtaining—that is, paying for—the services and commodities that would improve their lives.

This shift in policy and practice has facilitated the creation of the BOP in PNG. With the government leaving the business of development, the way was smoothed for companies to move in with their market-based vision that linked corporate profit with personal and social benefit. Indeed, Nestlé’s application of the generalities of a BOP template to the specificities of a PNG social field would follow seamlessly from the World Bank and IMF’s application of their template of structural adjustments. Nestlé, thus, was allied with other influential players in fostering a social transformation: in the interests of refining and rationalizing its marketing strategies, it worked to change PNG’s cash-strapped poor into entry-level consumers.

This transformation can be seen in Nestlé’s 2008 “Oceania, Creating Shared Value Report.” The report, in title and content, is consistent with Prahalad’s vision of a corporate as well as personal and social win–win. This is to say, the



FIGURE 3. Nestlé’s PNG product line as displayed at the Lae instant noodle factory.

products, prices, and promotions seen by Nestlé (see, e.g., Figure 3) as providing its competitive edge are linked to a BOP vision of PNG as a promising place and people:

We want our products to be accessible and affordable for everyone, including the 2.8 billion people around the world who earn less than USD10 per day . . . PPPs IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA—MAGGI NOODLES

With around 85% of Papua New Guinea’s population sitting at the “bottom of the pyramid”—representing the poorest socioeconomic group—affordability and accessibility principles underpin our key products in Papua New Guinea.

#### THE PAPUA NEW GUINEA MARKET

- 85% of the population is at the bottom of the pyramid, with a per capita disposal income of under USD 2,700 [about \$7.40/day].
- 820 indigenous languages spoken.
- Large proportion of people living in settlements in rural areas.
- 57% literacy rate.
- People generally consume only one meal per day.

#### OUR RESPONSE

##### Affordability—getting the price and serving size right.

- Small pack sizes have been introduced across our key products in Papua New Guinea, in particular our key PPP in the region: Maggi noodles.

##### Accessibility—establishment of a comprehensive distribution strategy to insure our products are accessible.

- Increased presence at open food markets through the provision of Maggi noodles and Maggi-branded dishes through food carts.
- Increasing the number of Maggi “Kai” (food) Bars.
- New distribution channels to reach the many villages of PNG.

### Health and Nutrition—insuring products are nutritionally sound.

- Awareness and educational activities. Including the promotion of nutritious recipes and nutrition information.
- Maggi noodles contain iodized sodium. [Nestlé, Oceania 2008]<sup>11</sup>

Several observations can be made about how this marketing perspective refuses to get snagged on particularities, refuses to get hung up on differences if not dissonances. Although we learn that Papua New Guineans speak numerous languages, that only a bare majority are literate, and that many live in villages, none of these characteristics matters much to Nestlé. Rather, what matters are their BOP characteristics. In essence, PNG is a place of interest to Nestlé because its people comprise a substantial, relatively uniform, and accessible market: they are poor; they can be reached even if not living in urban areas; they might well be convinced that their main meal of the day should be (at least in part) inexpensive, convenient, universally tasty (salty, if iodized), and filling instant noodles. The differences that often engage anthropologists, thus, prove irrelevant to marketers, at least as their gaze searches for the fortune at the bottom of the pyramid.

Of course, as indicated, no large company will configure products for poverty as well as extreme cultural particularity—as with 820 sets of cultural expectations.<sup>12</sup> After all, the BOP category is premised on a mass market defined by homogeneity—by commonalities between consumers as measured by the widely available products they can consume. In this regard, not only commodities but also the potential consumers—the PPP and the BOP in this case—have been equally “fetishized” (to use Karl Marx’s famous term [1906]), perhaps especially so in culturally diverse PNG. Both have stripped down biographies that allow their flows through the market to be clean and unencumbered. The throngs of products that arrive at the likes of Food Mart in Lae are not encouraged to speak about the conditions—social, temporal, spatial—of their product lives. Such is made intentionally irrelevant to assure that their value can be narrowly measured by supply and demand. Similarly, the throngs of potential consumers who arrive at the likes of Food Mart are not encouraged to speak about the conditions—social, temporal, spatial—of their BOP lives. Such is made intentionally irrelevant to assure that their worth and identity can be narrowly measured by what they can afford.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the BOP is understood as an imperative to seize a pervasive market opportunity, not as an imperative to confront a persistent economic inopportunity: it becomes the diagram of a market, not the diagram of social and economic inequality (with 85 percent in poverty in PNG). Everything is smoothed out; dissonance and turbulence are minimized; matters are under control.

This homogenization, this smoothing, is fundamental to Food Mart’s very existence, which, for merchandiser and consumer alike, relies on the rationalized efficiencies of contemporary supply chains: those (to reiterate) that market commodities, often made by unknown people through un-

known processes in unknown places, to consumers for evaluation and choice. These efficiencies require what Anthony Giddens (1990) calls “time-space distantiating” and David Harvey (1990) terms “time-space compression.” (See, too, Inda and Rosaldo 2007:7–10.) That is, the provisioning of supermarket shelves, whether in Lae or Los Angeles, demands the social, temporal, and spatial coordination of producing, distributing, selling, and consuming. As Harvey explains:

The general trend is towards an acceleration in turnover time (the world of production, exchange, consumption all tend to change faster) and a shrinkage of space horizons. In popular terms, we might say that Toffler’s (1970) world of “future shock” encounters, as it were, Marshall McLuhan’s (1966) “global village.” [1990:425]<sup>14</sup>

To be sure, few Papua New Guineans are experiencing the future with the degree of shock they once may have felt (e.g., 40 years ago when Toffler [1970] coined his term). Nonetheless, the ongoing exigencies of urban and periurban life provide significant challenges.

### ARE NOODLES MAKING THE CONSUMER?

Instant noodles, we think, are having a role in cushioning the contemporary “shock” experienced in this Pacific precinct of a global village. More specifically, we venture that the often-daily consumption of instant noodles is helping to normalize and homogenize the identity of urban and periurban Papua New Guineans by “BOP-izing” them into committed consumers.

Clearly this is Nestlé’s intent in sending a Papua New Guinean “Sampling and Events Manager” and her “road show” throughout the country to instruct and inspire women in villages and towns (often working through women’s church groups). This manager told Errington and Gewertz during 2011 that these occasions are enthusiastically received. Called (in translation from Tok Pisin) “Happy Day at Your Place,” they are intended to change people’s lives. First establishing the nutritional importance of three (not just one, or perhaps two) meals each day, she and her team demonstrate that Nestlé products can be the basis of well-balanced meals, arguing that “processed foods are fine if mixed with locally produced ones” (personal communication, Errington and Gewertz, March 7, 2011). Moreover, they suggest that their products can be used to celebrate special occasions like Mother’s or Father’s Day, as with a breakfast omelet filled with instant noodles and garnished with tomatoes and green onions. Further, they show that Nescafé and Milo taste better when prepared properly. Finally, they propose that wives, now with new domestic skills and aspirations, deserve good quality cookware from their husbands. All of this is part of Nestlé’s “corporate social responsibility” and commitment to “good food, good life.” The overall message is that, if families eat as she and Nestlé advocate, “the kids will grow up well, will be healthy, have a good education, and get a good job—and the whole community will be happy.”

We also base our claim that instant noodles help create committed consumers on conversations Errington and



Gewertz have had with urban and periurban Papua New Guineans of various ages living in and around the town of Madang (Chambri and others) and on survey data designed to tap consumer preferences in broadly contrasting ethnographic areas.<sup>15</sup> Our evidence is consistent: instant noodles are a multiply palatable commodity, one that, for interrelated reasons, goes down easily. They are good to buy, good to think, and good to sell.

First, and most significantly, noodles are good to buy. Certainly those 189 Papua New Guineans surveyed by our research assistants in the coastal town of Madang, the highland town of Goroka, and the village of Bumbu (adjacent to Gusap-located Ramu Agricultural Industries) exercise active choice among instant noodle brands. So, too, do most of those with whom Errington and Gewertz spoke. When asked whether there was a type they prefer or dislike, 80 percent of those interviewed report having distinct preferences among brands, with many choosing Maggi over imported instant noodles, not only because of taste but also because of in-country manufacture. (One 24-year-old male contrarian, however, said that he enjoys choosing a specific imported brand because it is not popular with his friends.) The choices they make rarely depend on the number of grams a package contains (and most are unaware that packages vary between 65 grams and 85 grams). Nor, for 61.4 percent, do these choices depend that much on relative price, because all varieties are inexpensive (costing in urban contexts, between \$0.26 and \$0.32). Most spoken with and interviewed convey that if they like it, they buy it. In addition, instant noodles provide other opportunities for choice. Respondents told Errington and Gewertz that they like choosing whether to eat noodles as a snack for themselves, straight from the package (after all, instant noodles are instant because they are precooked), or as an easy-to-cook meal to share with others, often members of an extended family. And, if the latter, they have the further choice of serving the noodles either as a main ingredient or (more frequently) as an extender for rice and root vegetables, sometimes with inexpensive canned fish. As well, they like choosing how to use the flavor sachet, either as a flavor enhancer with soup or as a condiment with vegetables. One young woman told Gewertz that she wouldn't consider wasting the sachet on soup because it is so good as a dip for cucumber. Further, both those spoken with and interviewed report that instant noodles are variously employed and regarded either as a carbohydrate when used as the basis of a meal or as a vegetable or a protein when used as a topping. Indeed, instant noodles can be mixed and matched with just about anything around.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, people do not report getting tired of them. In fact, those interviewed eat instant noodles, either alone as a snack or shared with family members as a meal, an average of 6.7 times per week. As one 50-year-old male enthusiast put it: "If noodles weren't available, there would be no hope because I cannot live without them; they make all meals taste better" (interview, research assistant Waka Tosa, August 9, 2009). A 25-year-old female echoes this sentiment: "Eating



**FIGURE 4.** *A rural child (from Wabo) enjoys Maggi instant noodles straight from the package.*

instant noodles is something I can't live without" (interview, research assistant Waka Tosa, August 7, 2009). We might add that, as indicated earlier, this young woman could well wean her children on them and commemorate her grandmother's death through including them in ritual exchange (see Figure 4).

Second, instant noodles are good to think. Without doubt, many Papua New Guineans enjoy participating in cosmopolitan networks, such as evangelical Christianity (Robbins 2004), in part because these indicate that they belong to the same modern world as everyone else. Comparably, because Papua New Guineans know that instant noodles are popular with all sorts of people elsewhere, eating them enables pleasurable engagement in a wide network of like-minded consumers. In this regard, PNG's Paradise Foods recently introduced two varieties of instant noodles called "USA styled" and "England styled." Television ads showed actors depicting President Obama and Queen Elizabeth eating them (with the tag lines "they are even enjoyed by presidents" and "they are even enjoyed by the Queen"). Under consideration is another ad depicting Prince William and his bride eating them at their wedding. Instant noodles are, hence, different from another food Gewertz and Errington (2010) studied in PNG: "lamb flaps" (sheep bellies). Whereas many Papua New Guineans express ambivalence about flaps, virtually none do about instant noodles. PNG consumers know that (white) New Zealand and Australian producers and purveyors generally do not eat flaps because they are too fatty—that they regard them as suitable for their dogs. In contrast, instant noodles are not stigmatized. They do not provoke. If there is a flap about flaps among Papua New Guineans, there's nothing notorious about noodles.<sup>17</sup> Not only filling but also nonfraught, instant noodles are a

double comfort food. Because everyone knows that everyone eats them, they appear to equalize. This despite the fact that they are eaten in different amounts and for different reasons by differently located people—some who are of the BOP; others not.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, instant noodles are good to sell. They circumvent some of the difficulties of making a profit from the BOP. As mentioned, a major challenge is to provide enough content to be appealing in single-unit sales yet in small enough packages to be affordable. However, reducing package size usually means that packaging costs go up relative to content. Not so with instant noodles because the standard size is the small size. Moreover, because one basic product serves all—at least in nonsaturated markets—an instant noodle company need only produce a single product line, tweaked largely with minor changes to the flavor sachet.<sup>19</sup>

For all of these reasons, Nestlé was astute in designating instant noodles the cornerstone of its PPP line for the BOP in PNG.

## CONCLUSION

Instant noodles, we have shown, are a protean food, one designed for quotidian consumption. They have the market niche of the ubiquitous. In effect, they are the lowest common denominator, the universal solvent. That instant noodles are easy to like and go down smoothly serves them well as an antifriction device: one that offsets the pauses, drags, and redirections of global capitalism. Hard and soft in their globalizing effects, instant noodles importantly sustain (the likes of) urban and periurban Papua New Guineans while transforming them into contending consumers—indeed, consumers of a modern product that links them to everyone, everywhere. This is to say, instant noodles are having a daily role in transforming the urban and periurban PNG poor into the BOP. And cash-dependent Papua New Guineans are pleased with their access to a world-pervading, competitively priced, convenient, satisfying, daily belly filler—pleased with their access to this particular kind of contemporary hunger killer.

But what's to come? Though helping poor urban and periurban Papua New Guineans hang on, instant noodles do not necessarily help them move up. And to have been made into the BOP (with or without aspirations for Maslow's self-actualization) may bring its own problems. To be stuck at the bottom of the BOP, we think, may undermine the reciprocity presumed to underwrite the win-win relationship between aspiring though vulnerable consumers and established sellers: this is the expectation that the deal includes both getting value and being of value. Correspondingly, a perceived default on this deal might well elicit strong and insistent demands for the "dignity of attention and choices" as touted by Prahalad.

Cross and Street's previously mentioned account of Hindustan Unilever Limited's promotion of its Lifebuoy soap to the BOP in India becomes a cautionary tale here of reciprocity neglected. They describe a BOP pushback, one sug-

gesting to us that the perception of win-win had shifted to one of rip-off. This BOP response conveyed a strategic defetishization of an important and everyday commodity. It took the form of a politically potent expression of anger that soap was not just soap but, instead, was a self-serving and deceptive substitute for clean water. The response conveyed a salutary warning that social relations, whether of respect or disdain, could well define the deal consumers think they are getting with their respective purchases.

Recent events in PNG have also conveyed a forceful warning about who owes what to whom. Shortly before Errington and Gewertz's 2009 visits to the Nestlé facility in Lae, cell phones (as seen earlier, a product often lauded as beneficially transformative of the lives of the BOP as they move up the pyramid) were used to coordinate the massing of rioters intent on stripping the shelves of certain businesses. These were widespread, loosely organized attacks of negative reciprocity against those thought, in the quality of their products and in their attitudes, to treat the PNG consumers as of little value. Instant noodles, thus, may change the poor into nascent consumers; however, unless purveyors of the commodities keep their part of the deal, these nascent consumers will not stay happily in place. Win-win clearly is an ongoing project, one requiring lots of work.

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**Frederick Errington** *Department of Anthropology, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 06106; frederick.errington@trincoll.edu; http://culturalanthro.com/*

**Tatsuro Fujikura** *Graduate School of African and Asian Area Studies, Kyoto University, Kyoto 606-8501 Japan; fujikura@asafas.kyoto-u.ac.jp*

**Deborah Gewertz** *Department of Anthropology, Amherst College, Amherst, MA 01002; dbgewertz@amherst.edu; http://culturalanthro.com/*

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## NOTES

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1. Instant noodles are, thus, significantly different in their effects than, for instance, was McDonald's in Moscow. According to Melissa Caldwell (2008), Muscovites—already committed consumers—made McDonald's thoroughly their own. However, while active in their domestication of McDonald's, Muscovites were far less domesticated by McDonald's: it is quite unclear if the routinizing logic of McDonald's will shape these consumers by organizing and regulating their daily life. But for a counter example of how McDonald's instilled consumer discipline in Hong Kong, see Watson 1997.
2. These foods all have perceptive anthropological biographers: Sidney Mintz (1985) discusses sugar in processed food worldwide; Jon Holtzman (2003), the use of imported tea in Samburu systems of meaning and sociality; William Roseberry (1996), the creation of niche coffee markets; and Paige West (2010, 2012), the production of coffee in PNG and its movement worldwide. For a discussion of caffeine in tea and coffee, see Weinberg and Bealer 2001.
3. Dr. Patrick Webb (of the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University) cautioned Errington and Gewertz that those truly at the bottom of the pyramid, who are often dependent on humanitarian aid including relief feeding, are not direct participants in the market at all.
4. W. W. Rostow (1952) postulates that traditional society, when confronted with the preconditions for take off (often involving coercion so as to free traditionalists from superstition), will begin a drive to maturity and eventually achieve what he considers to be liberating and democratic high mass consumption.
5. Abraham Maslow (1943) places "human needs" on five levels, from the base level of physiological needs to that of self-actualization. Furthermore, he argues that physiological needs must be met before humans will work toward higher needs. Among others selling to the BOP, the Moladi Company, which specializes in supplying inexpensive housing, uses Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" to advertize its products (Moladi 2009).
6. Prahalad envisions BOP-focused products as providing commercial and social good. The Nestlé Corporation would argue that supplying instant noodles—as inexpensive, filling, and, it would add, nutritious—is doing social good. Certainly, as we elaborate in this article, Nestlé urges consumers to supplement instant noodles with vegetables, greens, and protein. Correspondingly, relatively healthful recipes in Tok Pisin appear on Maggi instant noodle packages.
7. Fujikura, primarily an ethnographer of Nepal (see Fujikura 2007), had become interested in the project after observing a growing dependence on processed food there.
8. A variety of small-scale vendors also cater to those on the move. Cooked foods—including sausages, dough balls, bits of sheep bellies (lamb flaps), and fish pieces—are frequently available street side or at outdoor markets.
9. Coca-Cola has engaged in a similar initiative in PNG to increase sales and reward initiative. Push-cart mounted coolers, painted with Coke designs, were made available to entrepreneurs who would wheel them to busy places, such as outdoor markets. However, unlike the pots of soup, the ice-packed cans of Coke needed little monitoring.
10. Given Nestlé's anxieties about a recent cholera outbreak in PNG, the company's Sydney office decided, for the time being, to suspend use of the carts. We also have no independent statistics to verify the street price figures.
11. Nestlé's product line in PNG has long included its Milo malted drink (pictured in Figure 3). Milo, as relatively expensive, can be purchased only occasionally by most Papua New Guineans. As such, it contrasts with Maggi instant noodles. Consequently, it was with Maggi, not Milo, that Nestlé expected to penetrate and transform the PNG market.
12. Robert Foster (2008) documents the marketing strategies Coca-Cola adopted to cope with PNG's cultural diversity. Most of these strategies emphasized limited variations on a few themes—that is, "global systems of common difference," to use Richard Wilk's phrase (1995).
13. James Carrier (2010:4) makes a comparable argument that "seeing individuals as autonomous fetishizes them" by removing them from sociocultural contexts.
14. Marshall McLuhan first used the phrase "global village" during an interview in 1966. But, see McLuhan and Fiore (1968) for an elaboration of this term.
15. To tap consumer preferences in PNG's two broadly contrasting ethnographic areas, Errington and Gewertz commissioned two PNG researchers to conduct interviews in the coastal town of Madang and two more to conduct interviews in the Highland town of Goroka. These interviews took place during July–August of 2009. In addition, to learn about instant noodle preferences in a rural area that still had a subsistence base, they commissioned a former research assistant to conduct interviews at the village of Bumbu, which adjoins Ramu Agricultural Industries. They did not intend these interviews to constitute a random sample. Rather, they sought a broad overview of the role that instant noodles have in the lives of variously located Papua New Guineans. Most of the interviews in Madang and Goroka were with strangers the researchers met while circulating through the towns. Most of the interviews in Bumbu were with friends and family members. In Madang, 37 males and 43 females ranging in age from 10 to 65 were interviewed. In Goroka, 55 males and 29 females ranging in age from five to 55. And, in Bumbu, 10 males and 15 females ranging in age from 16 to 60. Thus, there are 189 interviews with 102 males and 87 females.
16. Wanzahari, Nestlé's PNG brand manager mentioned earlier, said that "noodle sandwiches" are popular among students in PNG's capital. They purchase a cup of noodles from one of the Maggi carts, drink off the liquid, and then place the remaining noodles within a split-open scone. Wanzahari welcomed such ingenuity. Anything Papua New Guineans came up was just fine with him.
17. There is some controversy outside of PNG about instant noodles. For instance, many of those in the United States with whom Errington and Gewertz spoke worry about the high sodium levels and presence of MSG in the flavor sachets and about the amount of saturated fat in the noodles themselves. Moreover, some implicate instant noodles in the ecologically destructive replacement of rain forests with oil palm

plantations because (highly saturated) palm oil is often used in flash frying them. See Sheridan 2008.

18. Noodle narratives Errington and Gewertz have been collecting about, for instance, college students or Silicon Valley programmers consuming instant noodles as snacks while working connect these people to, as well as importantly differentiate them from, urban Papua New Guineans eating instant noodles as a major source of affordable food. See Errington and Gewertz 2010.
19. We learned during 2010 from executives at Nissin Foods, Japan's leading instant noodle producer, that the Japanese market is thoroughly saturated. To appeal to Japanese instant noodle consumers, the company introduces about three hundred new products each year. To increase profits, the company intends to expand its operations in Russia, China, India, and Brazil.

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