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From products to experience ecosystems:
Haier's 'Internet of Food'

Haier had come a long way since Zhang Ruimin took it over as a failing Chinese Collective-Owned Enterprise in 1984. Since then, he'd been able to transform it into one of the world's leading appliance manufacturers, known for quality and innovation. Haier was also noted for its bold geographical expansion, which had included buying iconic European brands, such as Candy, and, in 2016, the venerable General Electric Appliances (GEA), one of the world's most established white-goods firms. Along the way, Haier pioneered a new managerial philosophy: *RenDanHeYi*, a policy of staying close to the user (a term Haier preferred to "customer") where employees were encouraged to act as entrepreneurs and held accountable for their actions. More recently, it had put the digital agenda at the heart of its approach, leading a revolution in household appliances and aspiring to be the leading ecosystem brand in the Internet of Things (IoT) – a distinction duly conferred on it by BrandZ[TM] in 2019.

However, Haier's ambitions went far beyond merely getting appliances online. Connected household devices were becoming commonplace – but Haier aspired to develop 'application uses' that could leverage product innovation. The Internet of Food started with smart connected appliances, but then a far-sighted entrepreneur founded a new Smart Kitchen Ecosystem Micro-Community (EMC), dubbed the 'Smart Kitchen EMC', that took an end-to-end approach to delivering chef-originated, pre-prepared meals direct to consumers. This involved linking various collaborating actors along the supply chain (organized, within Haier, as Micro Enterprises) to form an ecosystem that extended from farm to plate, ultimately creating a 'killer app' that could leverage Haier's IoT innovations and blend them into an exciting and compelling experience for the end user.

Haier had plenty of competitors in the increasingly complex world of networked kitchens. From appliance competitors like Samsung and LG to ecosystem stalwarts like Google and app specialists, everyone had their own idea of how a 'networked kitchen hub' might look. Moreover, solutions differed between countries – even within Haier and its US subsidiary, GE Appliances, suggesting that each market would require a different approach. The question remained: Who would offer a winning combination? And how should firms compete in such changing contexts?

Haier was well placed to pursue such innovations. But what would these innovations consist of? And, how should it differentiate between solutions that had emerged in China and those which had emerged in the US, through GEA? Would the 'ecosystem strategy' in this