

Transcript (begins after ads and iHeart Radio intro)

00:02:47 Devin (host)

I'm Devin Andrade from Toronto, Ontario and you're listening to the pilot episode of Crimes Against Food as part of the Next Great Podcast 2021 competition from iHeartRadio and Tongal.

If you wanted to whip up a quick cake right now, it wouldn't take much. All you'd need is a cake mix, water, oil and fresh eggs. But back in the early days of the convenience food revolution, you needed even less. Just cake mix and water. Two ingredients. At least at first.

And then everything changed and not just in cake mixes. In an entire industry. In the way we are sold a product.

Suspenseful, fast-paced music fades in

00:03:43 Katherine (guest being interviewed)

I think it was my strategic...principles of public relations course. It's like an overview of public relations, like PR 101 and it was in the textbook. We learned about the father of PR.

Devin

This is Katherine. She went to school for PR and marketing and now works in the industry. She and I do a lot of cooking and baking together and she's actually the one who told me about this case.

Katherine

We learned about that story because it's like the first kind of start into marketing and what marketing is today.

Devin

When she first told me about this story, I couldn't stop thinking 'why are there not more people talking about this?'

This idea, that marketing led to an ingredient change in a product.

Katherine

Unless you're in PR or marketing, you've just assumed, here's the product, marketing is given a product to market, which is often still to this day, not the case.

Devin

So, we're going to find out exactly how this happened.

Suspenseful music fades up and out.

Show theme music fades in

00:04:53 Devin

This is crimes against food. The mysteries of food histories.

Foodies and true crime junkies unite in this investigative series about the strange, questionable and borderline criminal things that have happened to food throughout the years. Justice is being served and these food crimes are going to do their time.

On this episode, the psychological manipulation of a boxed cake mix.

Theme music fades up and out.

Eerie, piano music fades in.

00:05:47 Devin

So who was this marketing guru? Doctor Ernest Dichter, otherwise known as suspect number one in this case. It's case Dichter was almost like a real life Don Draper. He had all those snappy slogans that Draper did, but he also had the psychology to back it up.

Statically archival audio of voice actor as Ernest Dichter

We don't go out and ask directly, why do you buy? Why don't you? What we try to do instead is to understand the total personality. The self-image of the customer. We use all the resources of modern social sciences. It opens up some stimulating psychological techniques for selling any new product and.

Devin

Just like Donald Draper, he had a pretty big reputation in the marketing and advertising industry. A 1998 article in the New York Times said he was the first to stress the importance of product image and persuasion in advertising.

And that was only one of the many marks that Dichter left on the marketing world.

But we'll get into the real impact of his work and his methods a little bit later.

First, let's look at the motives.

60s style, playful detective music fades in (think Pink Panther style)

00:07:00 Devin

Why did a well-established and trusted mogul like Betty Crocker need Ernest's help at all? Betty's whole thing was that she was every woman's trusted resource in the kitchen.

Staticky archival audio of male voice actor as a radio host from the 50s

Betty Crocker has some recipes and menu suggestions planned especially for these young home makers. So here she is, your Betty Crocker.

Staticky archival audio of voice actress as Betty Crocker from her radio show

Hello everybody, today I'm going to give you a recipe for the kind of meal every bride ought to know how to prepare for her husband. The recipe is economical and so easy to follow.

Devin

But it's like they weren't exactly turning to her for convenience. During the 1950s boxed cake mixes started to see this concerning trend in sales. This exciting new convenience food that Betty had so proudly promoted had already begun to plateau. It seemed like Betty was having some troubles getting women excited to buy her cakes.

So in comes Ernest Dichter.

Staticky archival audio of voice actor as Ernest Dichter

I interview people but not asked them direct questions. Let them talk freely like you do in a psychoanalysis. We use all the resources of modern social sciences.

Devin

And what he found was that women weren't rushing out to buy cake mixes because they felt like they hadn't actively participated in the cake. It was all done for them. They weren't emotionally invested in it.

And previously, marketers had relied on this message that home makers need to only drop this scientific marvel into a bowl, add water, mix, and bake.

But that was all a little too good to be true for the modern homemaker. Even if Betty Crocker was the one telling them to do it.

What I found was that a lot of the previous reporting about this case always points to Dichter making a significant suggestion at this time. He believed that powdered eggs, often used in cake mixes, should be left out so women could add a few fresh eggs into the batter. Giving them that sense of emotional investment.

He believed that baking a cake was an act of love on the woman's part. A cake mix that only needed water, cheapened that love. So the act of adding fresh eggs... was an act of love.

Sound of egg cracking

Suspenseful, up-beat music fades in

00:09:33 Devin

At this point in the case, something wasn't adding up to me. You've got a baking icon with a team of scientists and food experts on her side, then a marketer and psychologist comes along and just suggests a change in the ingredients of one of their products? Did he even understand what that meant for the cake?

I'm not so sure, but I also need to investigate what those eggs meant for the cake, because, unlike Dichter, I'm not going to make claims about this cake without actually knowing how it works.

As the next line is said, baking sounds begin to play. Beeping sounds of oven being turned on, playful 60s detective music fades in, popping sound of the cap of cooking spray, shaking and spraying sounds, crinkling of cake mix packaging being opened. Hand mixer sound fades out as line ends.

In order to crack this case and understand these cake mixes, I've got to investigate the eggs myself, and that's going to require some very scientific testing.

00:10:27 Devin (now in the lab, testing the cake mix)

Oven's preheated. I mean, this alone is a feat of science. All of the ingredients in here.

OK, so now we're going to pour this into our pan? Yeah, pour batter in pan and bake immediately! Immediately! No hesitation.

OK, here we go. And we're going into the oven.

Trumpet, playful 60s detective music fades in

00:11:06 Devin

So to further investigate the eggs in this crime, I went digging back through files and any kind of evidence I could find and I don't want to EGG-xagerate too much when I say this, but I was able to track down some previous evidence from this case where a detective actually got an interview with one of the big players in this case.

Distant sounds of busy police station fade in, footsteps grow louder, door closes, metal chair is pulled out. Audio is distorted like an old recording.

00:11:44 Detective

So Gregg, do you know why we brought you in here?

Gregg

I don't know nothing.

Detective

Seems like you might have gotten mixed up with the shady batch of...

Gregg

They said they needed my help! I didn't have any reason to say no. They seemed like good company.

Detective

What exactly they ask you to help with?

Gregg

They hatched this scheme. Emulsify this, moisten that, help us rise to great heights.

Detective

Alright, enough with the lingo. Emulsify? Doesn't sound that important to me. Tell me what you were really doing.

Gregg

I was literally the one holding things together. No one understands the pressure that puts on you. I became a shell of a man.

Detective

You're starting to sound a little scrambled there, Gregg. Something bothering you?

Gregg

Everyone thinks it's over easy, but it's actually hard boiled. They don't get it. If I don't do enough, things might turn out too soft and flat. If I do too much, it gets tough and chewy.

Detective

That's enough pressure to make someone... crack. You ever thought about leaving?

Gregg

Yea right, then what would they do?

Detective

Ever heard them talk about... other options?

Eerie, fast paced music fades in

00:12:54 Devin

Gregg refused to answer any further questions without legal counsel, but it got me thinking, which came first, the cake? Or the egg? And if it was the cake, well, what happens without the egg? So back to the lab for further testing.

Devin (now in the lab, testing the cake mix)

It is half a tablespoon of ground flaxseed with 1 1/2 tablespoons of water. You want this to sit for at least 5 minutes.

Devin

For this test, I wanted to know what happened when I added what's known as a flax egg. It's a common egg substitute for people who are plant based or allergic to eggs. And it just seemed strange to me that there was no mention so far in any of the documents in this case that talk about what happens when there aren't eggs in the cake or what are the eggs doing in the cake?

As the next line is said, baking sounds begin to play with suspenseful, urgent music underneath. Popping sound of the cap of cooking spray, shaking and spraying sounds, crinkling of cake mix packaging being opened. Hand mixer and oven being opened fades out as line ends.

So what I needed to find out is if the flax eggs could produce the same result that the fresh eggs did.

Ad break

Oven timer beeps

00:16:20 Devin

Once the two cakes were done, I compared the results. I had some lab assistants with me at the time who also gave their feedback.

Devin (now in the lab, testing the cake mix)

How's that one look?

Lab assistant #1

Mhm, nice.

Devin

Good structure, good texture, very firm.

OK next one. Oh, it's oh, it's just falling apart a little bit. It's gooey, right?

Lab assistant #2

Mhm.

Devin

Ok.

Devin

And what we gathered was that the flax eggs couldn't quite measure up to the results of the fresh eggs.

Now this might clear Gregg's name from our investigation, but these results are also not something Dichter ever mentioned about the cakes. He never talked about what the eggs are doing. He only focused on the feelings.

Suspenseful, fast-paced music fades up and out.

00:17:13 Devin

By the time I was done baking those two cakes, I was feeling pretty tired. I felt like I had expelled more than enough energy and effort to show how much I cared. And that feeling right there, that need to justify that what I was doing was enough. That was exactly what Ernest Dichter loved to capitalize on.

He put together a bunch of group sessions where housewives could free associate about cake mixes and they could say whatever words or thoughts came to mind.

Actually, he was kind of the mastermind behind that whole technique that later came to be known as a focus group. His whole theory was why can't we have a group therapy session about products?

And that's exactly what he did. In a room, above the garage of his mansion in New York.

If you've ever been part of a focus group or seen an episode of Mad Men where they had women come into the office and try a bunch of different lipsticks or something like that, while the men watched from behind a two-way mirror. Ernest was the mind behind that method.

So now we know how Ernest came to the conclusion that consumers felt this unconscious guilt about the ease and convenience of these cake mixes.

Suspenseful, piano, fast paced music fades in underneath

But this is the point in the case where, for me, Dichter loses all credibility in the reporting because he will take all the credit for what happens next.

This is where all previous investigations of this case have fallen apart... much like that flax egg cake.

Looking back through documents, in this case, there's a significant piece of evidence that conflicts with the story that's always been reported.

Actually, there are two pieces of evidence.

Music intensifies, fades up and out

Mysterious, eerie music fades in

00:19:25 Devin

If we go back in time further to the 1930s, that's where we'll find the 1st and 2nd patents that were ever filed for a boxed cake mix. They were filed by P Duffs and Sons, a Pittsburgh based molasses company, who invented the first ginger cake mix because of abundance of molasses.

Their first patent in 1930 included the use of dried egg in the mix and only required the addition of water. Their second patent, however, filed only a few years later, points out something very significant.

They filed a second patent so soon after because they may have very important discovery about their consumers and the cakes themselves.

Fresh eggs generally produced better results and consumers expressed a preference for them. That was in 1935.

This information would have been publicly available to other companies- Betty Crocker, Duncan Hines, Pillsbury. All the companies getting in on the box cake mix game would have known this information.

The fact that consumers preferred fresh eggs was not actually the revolutionary finding that Dichter took credit for.

So with this new evidence, there had to be something else that helped increase sales in the 50s.

Something completely different.

Music fades out. Sound of can of soda being opened and bubbling as it's poured.

00:21:14 Devin

I'm going to do something completely different. I'm going to go against all of Ernest's research and psychoanalysis. Despite all the science and all the studies, there's still a truth they're hiding from us.

The two-ingredient cake lives on.

I'm making a boxed cake mix with just the mix and carbonated water.

Sound of can of soda being opened and bubbling as it's poured.

Devin (now in the lab, testing the cake mix)

And in with the batter, and that's all.

OK this is already very bubbly compared to the other ones, so I'm very curious what happens when I start mixing it?

Sound of hand mixer starting and fades out

Honestly, it looks just like the egg one did.

Sound of cake pan being placed on metal rack in the oven. Oven door closing. Beeping sound as oven timer is being set.

00:22:00 Devin

So what does this final cake lead us to? Well, if we compare it to the cake made with fresh eggs, there's definitely a difference in the structure of the cake. But it's still a delicious cake.

And, it actually revealed another significant finding in this investigation.

Devin (now in the lab, testing the cake mix)

OK, this fully just like blows this entire investigation out of the water and like what even are we doing here?

I was just looking up measurements for the final cake. But I've never actually seen that Betty Crocker herself has one of these recipes on their site, on her site.

Playful, mysterious music fades in underneath

Devin

Betty Crocker has a 2-ingredient cake recipe listed to this day. They know it works and they know people might want it. But why?

Devin (now in the lab, testing the cake mix, talking to lab assistant)

I wonder if for the carbonated water one, if it would be more perfect for cupcakes, you know? Where there's not as much surface area. So the lightness kind of works in its favor.

Music fades out. Eerie, suspenseful music fades in.

00:23:11 Devin

And what is a crucial part of a cupcake? The frosting. No one serves naked cupcakes. And that was the real reason consumers started buying boxed cake mixes again.

Betty Crocker steered attention away from the mix's ease of preparation by promoting lavish frosting designs on packaging, in cookbooks, in advertisements. Appearance became the standard for success, overshadowing flavor and texture.

So it was the act of decorating the cake that made consumers feel like they were doing enough.

Now remember what that New York Times article said about Dichter's work? He stressed the importance of *product image* and persuasion in advertising.

00:24:07 Devin

So who is the real criminal here?

I went into this investigation thinking it would be the eggs, or even the food scientists that haven't really talked about the fact that carbonated water works. But the impact that those two had is nothing compared to Ernest Dichter.

Yes, Dichter was right that the cakes should have fresh eggs in them, but only because it made them better cakes. And the industry already knew that. Yet Dichter still came into the picture, leaned on his fresh egg revelation and this became a huge turning point in his career and the industry.

These cake mixes validated Dichter's methods. There's a reason his name is still mentioned in marketing textbooks like Kat's. Soon every piece of marketing involved psychoanalysis.

This idea that you have to know what the consumer's real needs are in order to exploit them had been normalized. And to this day that manipulation continues.

Except now they've got our data to use, to psychoanalyze, and to manipulate.

All because of some fresh eggs.

Suspenseful music fades up and out.

Theme music fades in.

00:25:51 Devin

Coming up on this season of Crimes Against Food- cereal killers and the twisted truth of everyone's favorite breakfast food, a drug cartel for Dunkaroos and the old and the mold behind best before dates.

This episode was written and performed by me, Devin Andrade.

With additional voices by Graham Becksted, Jesse Kirschenbaum, Adam Hutchinson and Katherine Sousa.

Special thank you to my lab assistants Neil and Lori Andrade.

And a very special thank you to you, for listening, for checking out this pilot episode. If you enjoyed what you heard, be sure to vote for the show. So that we can continue serving up justice for these crimes against food.