

Recipe for success?

Even the simplest design changes typically involve teams of researchers and millions of dollars.

BY MICHELE MEYER

IT WASN'T AGE but necessity that led Betty Crocker, grand dame of baking, to seek a superstar-style makeover. "The package can make or break a product," says Audrey Guskey, marketing professor at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. "It's a manufacturer's silent salesman and has to have a 'wow' effect. The average shopper spends 27 minutes in the supermarket, and the average store has 30,000 items. So consumers spend a fraction of a second looking at a package."

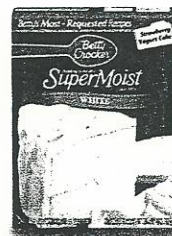
You may not give any thought to wrappers, but marketers looking to increase brand awareness do. In the past year, a variety of familiar products got new looks: Pop-Tarts debuted teen-aged, eye-popping graphics; the Saran Wrap box switched from its signature yellow of 40 years to bright red; Crest toothpaste tubes went from white to cool-blue; and Coca-Cola darkened its trademark red and pumped up its graphics for a hipper look.

What fuels the face-lift of a supermarket star? Betty Crocker's parent company, General Mills of Minneapolis, devoted more than a year and more than \$1 million to making over its cake, cookie and muffin mix boxes. Top packaging consultants, food photographers, photo stylists, graphic artists, marketers — and consumers — were consulted. Here's the story behind SuperMoist's bid to become the belle of the baking aisle.

JULY 2002: For seven years, Betty Crocker relied on an inconsistent array of typefaces, camera angles and background colors for its mix cartons. Even worse, "the piece of cake looked like styled Styrofoam," says Janine Heffelfinger, brand design director for General Mills. "It wasn't the 'I want to eat this right now' message we were aiming for." To see whether consumers agreed, the company convened three focus groups,



"We wanted that warm-and-homey feeling," says a member of the team that redesigned Betty Crocker's SuperMoist boxes. Above, the old (top) and new looks.



who said the box failed to stand out, its purple background was "anti-Betty," and the cake "looked fake." Said one consumer: "Betty would not be happy."

It was time for a new look.

SEPTEMBER 2002: What *would* make Betty (the "homemaker" behind the line of dessert mixes since 1921) happy? Turns out the diva's demands were greater than J.Lo's. "More goes into the design of a box than a ball gown," Heffelfinger says. "Certainly, more people are involved in its creation."

Chicago's Lipson Alport Glass & Associates, the company's brand design and marketing consulting firm for 25 years, brainstormed new sketches for 800 consumers to review. LAGA made more than 100 versions of Betty's red spoon logo alone, while handwriting analysts pored over dozens of her "signatures."

"We live and breathe this brand. We like to joke Betty Crocker herself roams our halls," says Jack Heffern, vice president of brand design at LAGA, where a team of 20 worked full time on the redesign in a "war room" papered with

sketches. "We stare at that art all day."

By Christmas, LAGA had not only their spoon but also a "tool box" of colors, typefaces and logos for a uniform — and striking — SuperMoist look. "Consumers have a strong emotional connection to cake mix," Heffern says. "There are nostalgic memories of baking with Mom. We wanted to get that classic warm-and-homey feeling, with a soft, sunny background, evoking a kitchen. The red box border was created for uniformity, but the wavy band evokes the stirring of batter."

JANUARY 2003: A photographer, art director and four food stylists toiled for four weeks on the bakery shots that would adorn the boxes, using four sets deep inside General Mills — and away from competitors. "We worked hard to get the right photographer with the right product," says Nanci Dixon, General Mills' photography manager.

Perfectionists that they were, it took a full day to shoot one cake, Dixon says. "We baked dozens of cakes to cut into, to get that one perfect slice." No option was untried, including varying the number of layers; whole vs. cut; one slice vs. two; and a dozen directions for the swirls of each frosting flavor: "We tried every single thing you could possibly do with a cake."

MARCH 2003: So, did they succeed? An online survey showed shoppers found the new mixes in a virtual grocery aisle 15% faster than the old ones, and four out of five gushed over how delicious the new boxes looked. "One lady said the cookies looked so good on the package she could almost smell them," says Katy Dickson, marketing director for Betty Crocker Desserts. "More than 50% of those surveyed said they would be more likely to buy based on the new dessert designs vs. the old. That shows you how important your package is."

SUMMER 2003: General Mills shipped its new designs to the printer and checked to ensure each package's colors appeared as vividly as designed.

Now through September, new SuperMoist boxes (including two new flavors) will appear on supermarket shelves. If you're in Minneapolis and notice a slender, straight-haired 5-foot-2 blonde hanging around the baking aisle, it could be Dickson. Her work is over, but she can't leave it behind.

"Honestly, it's like seeing your best friend getting a makeover," she says. "You hope it'll be fabulous, and when it is, you want to applaud." ❧

Freelancer MICHELE MEYER has written for Real Simple, Saveur, Lucky and GQ.

The average supermarket has 30,000 items. So a box has only a fraction of a second to attract you.