Play-Doh

One person's trash can make a business treasure

Play-Doh started life as a pre-mixed floury paste called Magic Wallpaper Cleaner, used from the beginning of the 1900s to remove sooty coal dust off wallpaper. As home heating evolved, demand for the cleaner lagged, and by the 1950s, the U.S.'s biggest maker of the cleaner, Kutol, was in real trouble. Kutol was run by a Cincinatti family, the McVickers, and, needless to say, a lot of talk around their dinner table centered on what to do with all this obsolete wallpaper cleaner. In 1955, the founder's son, Joe McVicker, listened to his sister-in-law, a teacher, complaining how hard it was for her younger students to use modeling clay. He sent her some of his doughy, nontoxic wallpaper cleaner to try out with the students. It was a hit. McVicker called his enterprise Rainbow Crafts and took his product, sold in a can and only available in off-white, to trade shows. The Play-Doh recipe was patented in 1956, and it was first sold in the Woodward & Lothrop Department Store in Washington, DC. Yellow, red, and blue Play-Doh were introduced the following year. Play-Doh made Joe McVicker a millionaire by the time he was twenty-seven.

First exported in 1964, Play-Doh is now available in seventy-five countries and sales have remained consistent. The total amount of Play-Doh sold is the equivalent weight of 159 fully loaded space shuttles and 95 million cans are sold each year. Play-Doh's parent company, Hasbro, which acquired the product in 1991, continues to use armies of lawyers to protect the precious, patented Play-Doh name from being accepted as the generic name for all modeling

dough. More than two billion cans of Play-Doh later, Hasbro still wants to protect its turf. The formula for this soft, squishy play stuff remains top secret.

REFERENCES

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Dippin' Dots

The ice cream from outer space

THE KEY TO MAKING THE BEST ICE CREAM IS EXTREME COLD—if you freeze the mix quickly enough, ice crystals don't have time to form and the end result is wonderfully smooth and creamy. Extreme cold, though, doesn't mean Siberian, or even Arctic: we're talking way down below -250 degrees fahrenheit—temperatures even a commercial ice cream machine can only dream of reaching.

One day in 1987, Curt Jones was making homemade ice cream with a neighbor at his home in Lexington, Kentucky. As he cranked the handle, he tried to explain to his friend what he did at work. Jones, a microbiologist, worked at an agricultural feed plant, where he experimented with ways of freezing enzymes and "good" bacteria to put into animal feed.

At the plant, he said, they were using liquid nitrogen to freeze the feed into pellets at -340 degrees fahrenheit. You could do the same thing with ice cream, he explained by way of example. Three weeks later Jones, intrigued by thought of making ice cream at temperatures colder than a chilly day on Pluto, took his friend and some ice cream mix to the lab. They mixed it up with liquid