10 Trade Secrets We Wish We Knew
by Melanie Radzicki McManus

10: Lena Blackburne Rubbing Mud

Back in 1938, a Philadelphia Athletics coach named Lena Blackburne began mixing various batches of mud and water to create a substance that would dull the surface of glossy new baseballs, making them easier to grip. And, of course, it had to work without breaking the rules of baseball. Umpires had previously tried shoe polish, tobacco juice and the dirt beneath their feet to fix the balls, but while these substances did, indeed, dull the balls' surfaces, they also damaged the baseballs in the process.

Blackburne's eventual concoction -- crafted from rich mud found in southern New Jersey near the Delaware River (at his favorite fishing hole, to be exact) -- didn't wreck the balls. The Athletics' chief umpire gave it a thumbs-up, and soon other American League teams began clamoring for some. National League teams followed suit, and soon Lena Blackburne's Rubbing Mud was famous. Every Major League Baseball team uses the product today, but he won't say exactly where the revered mud hole is. "The mud is on public land, but we've always kept the location a secret to keep people from trampling it.

9: Mrs. Fields Chocolate Chip Cookies

So many people love gooey, chewy Mrs. Fields Chocolate Chip Cookies, it's only natural they'd want the recipe. But it's a secret, says the company. Bakers have long tried to figure out the recipe themselves through a process called reverse engineering, but most want the real thing. "The secretness of the recipe helped to build the brand's early buzz, and got people to try the cookies ... and then tell their friends," says Jim Joseph, author of "The Experience Effect." "It's a great example of a trade secret driving the success of the brand."

8: The New York Times's Best-Seller List

It's every writer's dream to get his or her novel on The New York Times Best-Seller list, the most influential such list in America, which dates back to 1942. So how do you do it? No one really knows. The New York Times won't reveal what constitutes a best-seller, saying its methodology is a trade secret.

It should be a relatively easy formula: A book that sells 'x' number of copies in a week or month or year is a best-seller. But one book that sells 32,000 copies can be named a best-seller, while another that sells even more is not. Times employees skirt around the issue, saying there are "official" best-sellers and "unofficial" best-sellers. This trade secret has gotten the company into legal battles at times. In 1983, William Peter Blatty, author of "Exorcist," unsuccessfully sued the newspaper for $9 million, saying that amount equaled his lost revenue when the paper didn't add his novel "Legion" to its best-seller list.

7: Listerine

Law schools often illustrate trade secret discussions with the example of Listerine. In the 1880s, Dr. J.J. Lawrence invented the antiseptic liquid compound Listerine, then licensed its secret formula to J. W. Lambert and the Lambert Pharmacal Co. Warner-Lambert Pharmaceutical Co., successor to Lambert and Lambert Pharmacal, dutifully made royalty payments to the Lawrence
family over the next 70 years, despite the fact that Listerine's formula was revealed along the way.

But in the 1950s Warner-Lambert (now Pfizer Inc.) decided it had shelled out enough money -- more than $22 million, to be exact -- for a secret formula that wasn't even secret anymore. So it sued for a judgment that it was no longer on the line for the licensing fees. Unfortunately for Pfizer, the courts sided with the Lawrence family, ruling that the contract makes no stipulation about stopping payments if the trade secret is legitimately discovered by others, which it could have done. And anyway, since Pfizer had obtained the formula in the beginning, when it was still secret, it had received a decided marketplace.

6: WD-40

About 80 percent of Americans use WD-40. The spray, which comes in a familiar blue-and-yellow can with a narrow, red straw stuck into its nozzle for dispensing, was originally developed in 1953 to prevent corrosion. The chemist who invented it sold the formula -- which he'd kept secret -- and his company for $10,000 just a few years later. Today, WD-40 is used for everything from removing sap, tar and adhesives from various surfaces to cleaning tools. The revered formula has been sitting in a bank vault for years; it was taken out once when the company changed banks, and again when the company's CEO, armored and riding a horse, brought it out for the company's 50th birthday. To further protect the formula's secrecy, the company mixes the substance in three different cities around the globe, then passes it on to its manufacturing partners.

5: Twinkie Recipe

Ah, Twinkies, that delightfully spongy, creamy snack of childhood. Old television ads tout their health benefits: "Hostess Twinkies give your child energy to go on, plus protein to grow on." "The inside has a super-delicious cream filling." "Hostess Twinkies supply whole egg protein for rich, red blood" [source: Ettlinger]. Yet despite the snack's popularity, the manufacturer, Continental Baking Company (now Interstate Bakeries Corporation), never wanted to reveal what made the snack, invented in 1930, so tasty.

4: Krispy Kreme Doughnut Recipe

This Southern delight's origins reach back to 1933, when a man named Ishmael Armstrong bought the Krispy Kreme Doughnut shop in Paducah, Ky., from Joe LeBeau, a Frenchman from New Orleans. More than 70 years later, that recipe is still under wraps, locked in a safe at company headquarters in Winston-Salem, N.C., where only a handful of employees have access to it. It isn't too hard to figure the recipe out, especially if you take a peek at the ingredients listed on the dry doughnut mix.

3: Big Mac Special Sauce Recipe

Rumors persist it's simply Thousand Island dressing, perhaps with some pickle relish thrown in. Others cry foul -- surely it's more than that! This secret recipe is so secret, it somehow got misplaced (as in lost) sometime in the 1980s. It was the restaurant chain's own fault. McDonald's wanted to cut costs, and created a cheaper special sauce. (Did customers even notice?) During the switch, the original recipe was lost, but no one knew because they weren't using it anymore.

Years later, a former executive returned to the company, and wanted to bring back the original sauce. That's when employees realized the recipe was missing. Fortuitously, the executive knew
who had produced the sauce 36 years prior, and contacted the company, which still had the recipe in its records. The original secret special sauce was back.

2: KFC recipe

One of the most famous trade secrets comes from loveable, white-suited Colonel Harland Sanders, who created a recipe for a tasty chicken coating about 70 years ago that contained 11 herbs and spices. That same recipe is still used today at his popular chain restaurant, KFC (aka Kentucky Fried Chicken). Initially, as he drove to visit potential franchise owners, Sanders kept the secret recipe in his head -- and the spices in his car -- although he eventually wrote it all down. His original, handwritten copy is hidden in a safe in Kentucky, and only a few select employees, bound by a confidentiality contract, know what the recipe is. For further protection, two separate companies each blend a portion of the mixture, which is then run through a computer processing system to standardize its blending.

1: Coca-Cola Recipe

The most infamous of all trade secrets in America is the recipe for Coca-Cola's Coke. At the end of the 19th century, Coca-Cola had a choice: Patent the recipe for its popular soft drink, which would mean disclosing its ingredients, or brand it a trade secret and keep things under wraps. Execs chose the latter route.

Since its invention, there have been numerous rumors about Coke's ingredients, including one that said the recipe contained bugs. Another rumor says two employees each know just half of the recipe, and only two people know the combination to the safe where it's stored. "Over the years, the rumors have taken a life of their own," says Scott Testa, assistant professor of business at Cabrini College.

Despite its stringent security measures, in 2006 a Coca-Cola employee and two accomplices tried to sell the Coke recipe to Pepsi, says Testa. To its credit, Pepsi promptly notified Coke officials, and the group was busted.