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Betty Crocker Adds B. Smith to Package For Cornbread Mix, and Sales Take Off

By STEVEN GRAY
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After trailing Chelsea Milling Co.'s Jiffy in the muffin-mix market for years, **General Mills Inc.** sought advice from some of its African-American employees on how to improve the marketing of its Betty Crocker corn-muffin mix.

Based on their advice, General Mills has repositioned the mix to appeal to blacks, including adding a photo of B. Smith, a restaurateur whom some consider the African-American Martha Stewart, to the package. The change has helped lift the company's corn-muffin-mix sales 22.3% in the 12 months ending in September 2006 even as it has raised some eyebrows.



New packaging for General Mills' cornbread mix (left), and the traditional Jiffy box.

So far Chelsea, a quirky family-owned company based in Chelsea, Mich., says it will stick with tradition and eschew any effort to market Jiffy beyond word of mouth. "Our idea of market research is not a room full of M.B.A.s," says Howard "Howdy" Holmes, Chelsea Milling's CEO.


Cruising the baking-goods aisle in a Southside Chicago grocery recently, Peddie Richmond, a 39-year-old African-American retirement-center worker, was quick to notice the change. She grew up eating Jiffy cornbread but recently decided to give Betty Crocker a try. "Sometimes, you just want to try something different," Ms. Richmond said.

It was nearly three years ago that Zack Ruderman, a General Mills executive newly assigned to manage the marketing of Betty Crocker's cookie and muffin mixes, first set out to turn around the performance of what was then called "Golden Corn Muffin and Bread Mix," a marginal part of the business.

Digging through market-research data at the company's Minneapolis headquarters, Mr. Ruderman was struck by the fact that blacks, who account for roughly 13% of the U.S. population, buy 36% of all cornbread mix sold in the U.S. He noticed that Jiffy's success appeared to be based mainly on its value pricing and customer loyalty. "You look at the shelf," he says, "and they just completely dominate. There's just a sliver of Betty Crocker, and not necessarily right next to Jiffy."

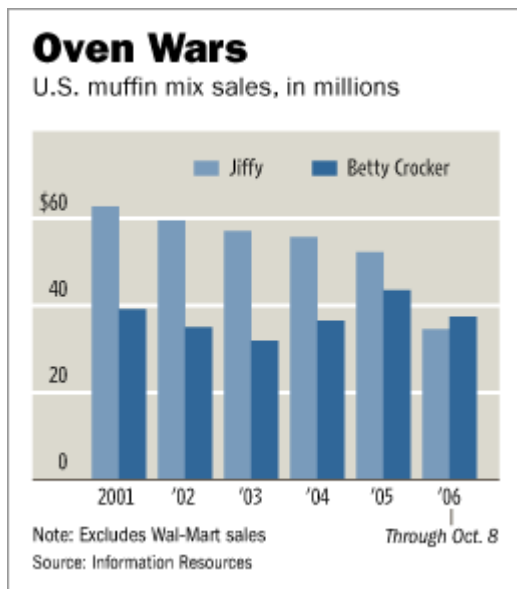
So Mr. Ruderman, a 34-year-old Harvard M.B.A., set out to boost Betty Crocker's share of the muffin-mix business by overtly targeting African-American consumers. It wasn't an easy

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proposition. The baking-mix market has remained stagnant for years, and the muffin-mix subcategory has been shrinking for most of this decade, according to the market-research firm Information Resources Inc.



Targeting African-Americans through packaging also carried significant risks: It is viewed by some as veering back into corporate America's past, when demeaning images of black women were used to sell everything from soap to pancakes. And the repositioned product might be viewed as too black, reducing its appeal to other consumers.

Mr. Ruderman, who is white, says: "I wasn't concerned about the risks of shifting marketing focus from the general market, because I felt when you're looking for experts, African-Americans have a lot more history and higher usage with cornbread."

Cornbread is one of the most hallowed dishes in African-American -- and, indeed, Southern -- cuisine. Experts trace its roots to Native Americans, who

introduced it to European settlers. Eventually, it became a staple of many black diets. In recent years, it has appeared in various forms at white-tablecloth restaurants.

Cornbread recipes can evoke a lot of passion. Some people like to add sugar and top it with butter. Many can't imagine eating any cornbread but Jiffy's. But others loathe packaged cornbread and insist on the kind made with corn meal. "The scratch kind," says Bernetta Jones, a 56-year-old black preschool teacher in Chicago's suburbs, when asked to name her favorite. "It's fluffy, and it's good."

Previously, few General Mills executives had given cornbread much attention, given the company's marginal role in the muffin-mix aisles. Even Mr. Ruderman had to juggle his passion for repositioning Betty Crocker corn muffins with his need to pursue such priorities as reformulating cookie-mix recipes. But "I didn't want to let the idea die," he says.

Saddled with a puny research budget, Mr. Ruderman turned to Black Champions, General Mills's black employees group, for insights on how African-Americans use the product. Ukonwa Kuzi-Orizu, a Nigerian-born business-school student interning in Mr. Ruderman's department, arranged for 20 or so members of the group to meet in a conference room at headquarters.

Ms. Kuzi-Orizu quickly discovered that most of the black employees at the meetings had grown up in families that used Jiffy and saw little reason to switch. She recalls one employee saying, "I'd never eat Betty Crocker cornbread because it's not for black people."

Some employees recalled adding buttermilk, peppers or corn kernels to their cornbread and, with a savory dish like boiled greens, greasing the skillet to make the edges of the cornbread crispier. "People were just calling out stuff," says Nevonia Rainwater, a 40-year-old black employee who was there. "They were shocked we added so many things to it," adds Ms. Rainwater, whose mother and grandmother made cornbread either with Jiffy or from scratch.

Ms. Kuzi-Orizu, now a 29-year-old associate program manager at General Mills, also recalls asking about "corn muffins," and an employee saying, "I can tell you about cornbread, but we don't call it 'corn muffins.'"

"Note to self, Stop calling it corn muffins." Ms. Kuzi-Orizu recalls thinking, adding, "That was our 'Aha' moment."

Betty Crocker's packaging had shown pictures of muffins, so Mr. Ruderman made cornbread baking in a skillet the centerpiece photo and tweaked the product's name to "Authentic Cornbread and Muffin Mix." Employees told Ms. Kuzi-Orizu that the bread on the original package looked cold, so designers added cues to suggest warmth, including steam rising from the butter-topped cornbread and soft shading in the lettering on the package.

To give the product credibility with blacks, Mr. Ruderman approached B. Smith, who had opened upscale soul-food restaurants in New York City; Sag Harbor, N.Y.; and Washington.

After Ms. Smith sampled the mix, she agreed to let Betty Crocker use her image on the package, and General Mills signed her as the spokeswoman for "Serving Up Soul," the company's effort to encourage black women to maintain healthy diets. Ms. Smith and General Mills declined to disclose financial terms.

Ms. Smith's inclusion on the cornbread mix's packaging drew some controversy. "It harkens back to the Aunt Jemima packaging, and the only thing that redeems it slightly is that it's B. Smith," says Crystal Thomas, a 29-year-old black doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign whose mother switches between Jiffy and made-from-scratch cornbread. Ms. Smith is "not a character or drawing. She's a figure who's associated with the home market. She has restaurants. She's not just any black woman." Ms. Smith, meanwhile, dismisses the criticism. "We've evolved," she says of African-Americans.

Last year, in the weeks before Thanksgiving, the peak cornbread-eating season, Mr. Ruderman inserted coupons promoting the repositioned brand in Sunday newspapers. The strategy worked: Just before Thanksgiving last year, Betty Crocker's cornbread-mix sales soared 50% from the previous year, according to General Mills.

Mr. Holmes, Chelsea Milling's 58-year-old CEO, denies that Betty Crocker has cut into Jiffy's market share in the value-muffin-mix segment, where Chelsea Milling has positioned itself. "We have a reputation, and we got to this point by word of mouth," he says, adding, "and it didn't cost us a dime."

Write to Steven Gray at steven.gray@wsj.com¹

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(1) <mailto:steven.gray@wsj.com>

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